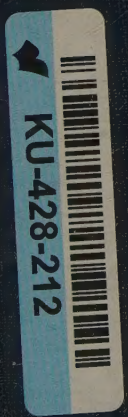
THE BLACK COMPANY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By W. B. M. FERGUSON

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THE BLACK COMPANY

A Mystery Story

By W. B. M. FERGUSON

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CHAPTER I

I TAKE A RIDE

TO be quite honest about it, I have no very clear idea what happened in that private room at the Princeton Inn the night of the last nip-and-tuck baseball game with Yale, except that every one of the crowd with the exception of myself was anything but sober. There were Roupell and Frean, Hewitt and Ashton—to mention only a few—who were quarrelsome and ready to take exception to everything I said. I didn't mind particularly about Roupell and Frean, but Bob Hewitt, being a particularly old friend, his condition pained me exceedingly.

I don't recollect precisely what our particular difference was about, my memory being notoriously faulty over trifles, but I know that somehow Hewitt and I had become the focal point of interest for the crowd. They were gathered round our table, and something seemed to have happened. Perhaps I had said a brilliant thing worth remembering—I often do—for Tommy Ashton, who is a lawyer, had his fountain pen out and was busy writing. No doubt he intended to be my Boswell. He was

smiling; so was everybody but Hewitt, who looked as serious as the war.

"See here, Pete," said Hewitt, leaning over the table and eying me hard, "you take witness before all present that you're perfectly sober——"

"Of course I'm sober! Did you ever see me when I wasn't? I was born sober! Why do you persist in insinuating that I'm drunk instead of yourself?"

"Oh, that's a particular failing of Hewitt's," laughed a fat voice; and, to my astonishment, I recognized Howard Roupell.

"Oh, hello!" I greeted. "When did you blow in?"

"With you," he chuckled. "You know I've been sitting next you all evening."

"The Harry you have! You aren't a Princeton man and you're old enough and, I dare say, unmoral enough to be the father of us all."

"I dare say," agreed Roupell, patting his fat paunch. "But I was at the game, you know, and since you invited me here——"

"*I* invite you? Nonsense! How could I, when this is the first time I've seen you since—well, I forget how long. It doesn't matter, anyway. I'm sorry to see that you're drunk, Roupell. It isn't right, it isn't decent, especially in an old man like you. You should set a good example, have more honor for your graying hairs and our youthful purity."

"It's *you* who's drunk—drunk as a fool," said another voice; and, again to my astonishment, I recognized Arnold Frean. Of course he had a perfect right to be there, but it was just like him to come sneaking in by a back door and slink among the crowd. A furtive fellow, Frean, with large, outstanding ears—otherwise he was quite handsome—that seemed designed expressly for listening at keyholes. There was no love lost between us, and, to his ridiculous and monstrous charge concerning my sobriety, he now had the audacity to add that, like Roupell, he had been present from the first, even sitting behind me at the ball game. Moreover, he stated that I had brought Roupell to the feast by intimidation and violence, threatening him with mayhem, and I forget what else, if he didn't join the party.

"For that matter you invited the whole town," finished Frean. "All the ragtag and bobtail—friends, I suppose, of your former days—and we had a hard time keeping 'em out."

"You're drunk, Frean," I said. "Drunk like Roupell. I'm sorry to see it, and I object to your face. Between ourselves, and speaking in strict privacy, I don't like it and never did. Take it away."

"You're like all the Lawtons," he said. "You can't take a drink——"

"I can! I'll have one now. Thanks for re-

minding me. I'll have more than one, and then I'll remove your face. That face of yours and Roupell's alleged funny stories are too much; as a combination——"

"Oh, cut it out!" exclaimed Hewitt, seizing my arm. "And you quit chipping him, Frean. Can't you stop your rowing? Don't get quarrelsome, Pete——"

"I'm not," I protested. "I'm the most peaceable man in the world. I'll fight anybody who says I'm not—*anybody*. I'm the only sober man in the room, too. You know that, Bob. You're all half shot and trying to pick a row, but you can't do it with me. No, sir. I'm perfectly willing to fight anybody who says he can—*anybody*. Only sober man in the room; never more sober in my life."

"Very well," said Hewitt. "That's what I've been trying to get at. You say you're perfectly sober? All right; now read over the agreement."

It was the first I had heard of any agreement, but Hewitt being so far gone, poor fellow—much further gone than I had even suspected—I decided to humor him. You have to humor the drunk; it is the only way to deal with them. He was in that perverse state where, if I had even hinted a denial of any agreement, he would have claimed triumphantly that I was drunk and he sober.

I confess, however, to astonishment when Ashton handed me a paper. But evidently, being a

quick-witted fellow, he was helping me on the spur of the moment to humor poor Hewitt. And when I glanced at the paper I saw he had been at some pains to fake up an agreement, though I could not quite grasp what it was all about, it being couched in the cloudy phraseology of the law which, coupled with Ashton's weird handwriting, rendered it quite unintelligible. Indeed, it made me dizzy to look at it, though, to humor poor Hewitt, I made a solemn pretense of reading it through.

"Is that right?" asked Hewitt. "You understand it?"

"Of course," I said angrily. Did he think I couldn't understand plain English put in plain writing?

"Very good. Then let it be signed and witnessed."

Ashton handed me his pen, one of those foolish affairs that start off with dumping half their contents down your sleeve, and then splutter all over the map. For that reason I found some little difficulty in signing my name.

"That's yours," said Hewitt. "Now sign my copy. Compare it with your own."

I did so dutifully. And now Ashton's writing had so improved by practice that I was able to understand, amid a wilderness of "Whereases" and "Aforesaids," the following words:

And furthermore I, Peter Lawton, being in full possession of all my faculties, do promise faithfully to earn my living by manual labor for a period of at least one month, dating from this seventeenth day of June, 1916.

"Very well," I said, tossing the signed document back to Hewitt. "Because I came into a pot of money and you didn't, you've always been throwing it up to me! Because I don't have to work and you do, you're sore——"

"It's not that at all, Pete. You started this argument about being able to earn your own living, even by manual labor——"

"I did nothing of the kind!"

"You did. And every fellow here knows you did. You can only repudiate your signature and that agreement by admitting what you would never admit before—that you weren't capable of——"

"I'm capable of anything—I mean everything!" I exclaimed. "I'll show you and the whole crowd! I can't earn my own living, eh? I'll show you. I stand over my signature and repudiate nothing!"

I forget what else I said, but it must have been very witty—I seemed to be in a rather happy vein that evening—for they all laughed and clapped me on the back—all except Frean, who stood aloof with amused sarcastic eyes. Then we all sang the old glees, and after an extremely pleasant time, of which I remember nothing, I found myself outside, talking with my chauffeur.

"Jensen," I said, "you're discharged. "Who's got your job? *I* have. I've got to go to work right away, and the only thing I can do with my hands is to feed myself and run a car. I can't feed if I don't work. Ergo, you're discharged. I know your employer, too; he's a good fellow, one of the best. I approve of him, and if I have to work, I'd rather work for him."

Jensen was a Swede, and at times rather stupid. Unfortunately this was one of the times and, moreover, he had been drinking like everybody else but myself. A drunken Swede—a terrible combination; no wonder I found it impossible to get him to understand my simple and dramatic statement. *"You* ban my boss," he kept repeating like a litany, his bleak face never changing. "How you work for yourself? You make a yoke, yes?"

"I make a yoke, no. I've got your job and that's all there's to it."

"But, boss——"

"There are no buts, my friend. Didn't you say the other day you were thinking of making a change? Well, you've made it. And don't let me hear you say again, 'Ay tank you ban drunk again, boss,' or I'll put you past thinking anything. How could I be drunk again when I've never been drunk in my life? I'm sorry to see that you've been at the bottle. However, I've now engaged a sober chauffeur."

He blinked at me. "You ban going to fire me——"

"I ban! Here, now, immediately, if not sooner! I've got your job and I'll hang on to it. I'm going to take the old bus all the way home myself and run it in future. I've got your job. I'm working for Pete Lawton."

It took some time for the truth to sink into Jensen's square dome, but when he saw I was quite sober, and in deadly earnest, he accepted the situation like a philosopher, the more so, perhaps, as I handed him a hundred-dollar bill in mistake for a twenty. Anyway, he disappeared, though I don't remember seeing him go.

I experienced some unexpected trouble in getting the car started and out of the parking space, but this was finally accomplished with the aid of a very obliging person with two faces, an oddity I had not remarked in him previously.

Five of the crowd, including Hewitt, were to return home with me to New York, but when I appeared with something of a flourish—if there is anything I can do it's drive a car—and they saw I was minus Jensen, their behavior was very peculiar. It became downright insulting when they learned what had happened to Jensen, and that I meant to take the wheel myself. One and all positively declined to accompany me, and, to fur-

ther aggravate matters, they insinuated I was in no condition to drive even a baby carriage.

"For the love of Heaven, you mad devil, come out of there!" cried Hewitt at length, springing on the running board and trying to shut off the spark. "You'll kill somebody or break your fool neck——"

"I'll break yours if you don't get off!" I shouted above the roar of the engine. "I've stood your insults long enough. You jeer at me for not working, and then, when I get a job with a good employer, a fellow I like and approve of——"

"One of you fellows run for a cop!" cried Hewitt. "And, say, can't the rest of you help me? Come on and do something! Don't you see he'll do what he says and that he isn't able to bite his finger?"

"I don't want to bite it!" I cried. "But you evidently do." For he had followed his words by coming over the door like a cyclone.

It only needed that personal contact, the employment of brute force, to snap my long-suffering patience and send my peaceful nature up in flame. I slung Hewitt into the road with one hand, while with the other I threw in the clutch. At the same moment Jensen appeared, and he and the other four fellows rushed me, followed by, it seemed, half the town.

What happened next could only be described by

half a dozen moving-picture machines working together at top speed. The high-powered six gave a bound like a tiger, and I took the sharp turn into the highroad at a forty-mile clip amid a parting scene that resembled a lunatic's dream of the battle of the Marne.

It was not until I had passed several towns that it began to dawn on me that some one had changed the map placing New York in a remote corner, where I was unable to find it. Meanwhile it was a lovely, warm, moonlight night—indeed, there were several moons—and, ceasing to brood over my wrongs, I began to find a certain pleasure in the ride.

It would appear that neither Paul Revere nor John Gilpin had anything on me when it came to rousing public interest and enthusiasm. Everybody I met made way for me instantly as if I were a king, showering benedictions and good wishes after me in the most approved manner. In several towns fire bells were rung, and the police force hastily mobilized. Even trolley cars stopped so that their passengers might have a glimpse of me as I passed; women fainted with joy, and several horses ran away through sheer excitement. No one ever had such a tremendous popular ovation, such a triumphal procession. My heart was filled with gratitude toward all these good people, and if I had not been in such a hurry to find out what had happened

to New York, I should certainly have stayed and accepted of their proffered hospitality.

In due time it occurred to me that rather than search at random I had better make inquiries as to the new location of Manhattan, for I had an important engagement the following day, and it would prove rather awkward if at the last moment I discovered the city to have been shifted, say, to Alaska. For you never know what those fellows at the topographical bureau in Washington are up to.

With me, to make up my mind is to act, and accordingly I now stopped the car and alighted. Perhaps it would have been just as well if the idea had come to me at another time and place, for now I discovered there was no one whom I could ask for information. In other words, I found myself absolutely alone on a deserted country road.

"I've always heard it said," I thought injuredly, "that to make up one's mind and to act promptly is a great virtue. But see what it has done for me! Now I must tramp about here until I find somebody who knows where New York is."

So I set off down the road. You will ask, perhaps, why I did not go in the car. But I have confessed to a memory that is faulty over trifles, and, for the moment, the trifling matter of the car had escaped me.

The next scene—for, somehow, this night everything happened in scenes—found me at a cross-roads, hat in hand, talking to a man and a girl. They sat in a town car de luxe, upholstered in maroon, electrically lighted within, and with a flower vase containing a bunch of violets that went wonderfully with the girl's hair.

Her companion was a little, dried-up old gentleman, rather foppishly dressed, and the color of bronze. I assure you he was. It was not sunburn, nor was he a foreigner; his face and hands were a distinct and emphatic greenish-bronze color, the like of which I had never seen before.

I have no wish to criticize his looks, for I am not a handsome man myself. In fact my cherished nickname at Old Nassau was "Mug." Taken singly, and if transposed, I have been assured by friends that my features are quite classical; I mean if my nose was turned upside down, and my nether lip projected inward instead of outward, and a good bit of my chin was shoved south—you get the idea. They are all good features, judged separately, but undoubtedly a serious mistake was made by somebody when they were being assembled.

The result is a tumultuous something, with knobs and projections in unexpected places, properly termed a "mug." Even though I wore a mustache in order to veil the subject as decently as possible, the result was still a mug. Indeed Arnold Frean would

have had infinitely more reason to object to my face than I to his; he really had one worth looking at—velvety brown eyes and all that Valentino stuff. I suppose I objected to it because it kept reminding me so poignantly of my own.

No, I am not a handsome man, and yet, do you know, I made the greatest possible impression on the little bronze gentleman and his beautiful companion. I assure you I did. How? Why, by my manner and bearing. There is something princely about me—there is no other word for it and, as I had noticed it before this evening, I needn't try to be mock modest about it—that is infinitely superior to mere good looks.

Real princes aren't handsome, nor princesses either; if you doubt it, take a look at the family album of the crowned heads of Europe. I own a sort of royal and magnificent bearing that commands the utmost attention, homage, and respect. One is born that way; there is no acquiring it. The little bronze gentleman and the girl, from the moment I appeared, couldn't remove their eyes from me—and they had many eyes, indeed more than their fair share; they had at least half a dozen between them. I welcomed the phenomenon in the girl's case, for one cannot have too much of a pretty thing, but the man's resembled holes burned in a blanket.

"You are mistaken, sir," I said, endeavoring to

explain the situation and correct the bronze man's ridiculous error that I had tried to get myself run over. "I am not a would-be suicide. The fact is I have lost something, something of infinite value, and I wished merely to solicit the help of the first passer-by."

"Oh, we must help him!" said the girl.

"Be quiet!" snapped the little mummy. "What have you lost?" he demanded of me, tapping a Malacca cane against his thin shanks.

"I have lost New York," I confided solemnly.

"Eh? What's that?" He had begun to sniff, as though preparatory to bursting into tears at the enormity of my misfortune, and against this contingency, he now produced a flowered silk handkerchief and held it to his nose. I was touched, deeply so; such sympathetic souls are all too rare in this world.

"Don't weep, sir," I said. "I can't bear to see you cry. True, I have lost New York, or rather it has been stolen from me; some vandal has removed it. But no doubt you can help me find it. I must be in New York without fail to-morrow, for I've an appointment which I can't neglect. In strict confidence, I may explain that I'm to be buried; so if I'm not there, how can there be a funeral? You see the point? Now, what would you advise?"

"That you enter the alcoholic ward of the nearest

hospital!" he answered, with sudden and unwarranted ferocity. "Faugh! You smell like a distillery. Go away, you sot!"

"Anything to oblige, sir. Where *is* the nearest hospital? If you will kindly take me——"

"Get out of here!" he roared. "Take your foot away, sir! Jules!"

Jules was the chauffeur, and he appeared, armed with a spanner.

The proceedings became a trifle involved. Not that in the presence of the girl I had any idea of making a scene; but I considered it only due to my self-respect to correct the bronze man's erroneous conception of my character and condition. And this I endeavored to do with the utmost politeness and amiability.

The girl appeared to understand my position, for her eyes—I now ascertained she had no more than the customary number—were quite sympathetic. I gathered that she wished to assist me, and, no doubt referring to some one else, she stated that it was cruel and inhuman to leave them when it was plain to be seen that they were helpless as a baby.

I was about to applaud her for this excellent sentiment when the little old gentleman banged the door in my face, Jules sent me sprawling, and the car whirled off, leaving me no wiser as to the fate of New York. Still, I was the better for the

adventure, for it left me with the happy memory of a beautiful, gracious, and charming young girl.

I now remembered my own car, and hastened to leave the crossroads down which the other had sped. I found my car where I had left it, and I found also a man cranking the engine.

"Thank you, so much," I said. "It's very kind of you to take the trouble. I've met quite a number of nice, obliging people to-night."

Evidently he had been so engrossed in his kindly, self-appointed task, that he had not heard me approach; for at my words he jumped back, crank in hand, as if I had demanded his money or his life. I could see him quite plainly by the light of the several summer moons. He was a big fellow, about my own height and weight, and quite respectably dressed.

It being a night of the most astounding phenomena—to mention only one fact, witness the several moons, to which I meant subsequently to direct the attention of Lick Observatory—I was not greatly astonished to discover that this new acquaintance had six fingers. I assure you he had; I saw them plainly as he held the crank. Nor was this all; far from it. He was the proud possessor also of a miraculous mustache capable of intelligent self-movement. I assure you of the truth of this too. When first he turned toward me, the mustache was in a most curious and humiliating position,

one end pointing to his Adam's apple, the other to his right ear. You will agree that no ordinary mustache can act like that even in its most abandoned moments. When next I looked at him, behold, it was in the conventional position, straight across his upper lip! An astounding, intelligent mustache that must be capable of moving automatically! It pleased and interested me exceedingly; it suggested the solution of many problems. Such an article would remove the terrors of eating soup —something of which I'm very fond, but which I've given up attempting in public. Such a mustache could be adjusted, nay, commanded, to any position and no longer behave like a strainer. I must try and get mine to behave that way, ask him how he had trained his.

"Say, is this your car, boss?" he asked in unaffected surprise. "I was goin' to take her to the nearest lockup—wherever that is. I thought she'd been swiped, see? You don't generally find such things layin' round a country road this time of night. How'd you come to leave her?"

Seeing he was such an altogether obliging fellow, distinguished, moreover, by owning six fingers and a movable mustache, I considered it only proper to explain how the car came to be there. He listened politely, scratching an ear with the tip of the crank, but I wasn't sure whether he had any better understanding than Jensen, for he had an

absent-minded way of looking up and down the deserted road.

"You now understand my predicament," I finished, taking out my wallet and giving him a bill for his thoughtfulness in cranking the car. "Perhaps you can tell me where New York is?"

"Sure, boss. You're almost in it. It's right over there."

"Where?"

"There," he said. "See the lights?"

I turned to follow his pointing finger, and, sure enough, I saw the lights. Indeed, I never saw so many in my life as something fell upon my head with a resounding crash. Then the lights went out as suddenly as they had come, and I lost all interest in finding New York.

CHAPTER II

I FIND A JOB

I AWOKE some twelve hours later, toward noon of the following day.

I now knew that I, and I alone, had been drunk the previous night, and had got only what I deserved. I realized that Bob Hewitt had tried to save me from myself, as he had done on other occasions, and I was filled with abysmal self-disgust. More, I experienced a lively dread when I thought of that mad ride from Princeton to Sea Bright—for it was near the latter place that it had ended. How had I escaped breaking my worthless neck, even granting the special Providence which is supposed to watch over the fool, sober or otherwise?

I remembered nothing of that ride but my meeting with the little bronze man and the girl; and whether this had really happened, I did not know. Rather, considering the impossible coloring of the gentleman, I knew the whole affair was merely one of the many strange pictures of my delirium. I remembered also the agreement I had made with Hewitt, and of my discharging Jensen, but all else that happened was a complete blank.

The good Samaritan who took me in was an old

farmer by the name of Taylor. It would seem that following my assault, the obliging stranger had not only made off wth my car, but everythng I carried, even down to the clothes I wore. Then he had deposited me behind a hedge, where I must have lain until early morning, for Taylor now told me that on his way to market he had found me crawling on my hands and knees from a field.

"Of course, I wanted to let your folks know what had happened to you and where you was, Mr. Joyce, but I couldn't find out nohow where you come from," he finished, beaming on me with his kindly, faded blue eyes.

"I haven't any folks, nor many friends that would care what happened to me," I said truthfully. "How did you know my name was Joyce?"

"Why, from the chauffeur's recommendation in your pocket."

So my assailant was a chauffeur, out of a job, and desperate, no doubt. And he had been in such a hurry to exchange his clothes for mine that he had forgotten to remove the telltale paper.

Now I had no desire to confess my true name and the circumstances leading to my assault and robbery, thereby providing a news item for the press. The less I said to any one about that crazy ride of mine, the better. Dressed in my new outfit, I was, to Taylor, merely a chauffeur by the name of Joyce, and such I determined to remain for

the time being. Accordingly I gave him an imaginative account of myself and the night's happenings, yet it bore some resemblance to the truth.

He was a kindly soul, and, after giving me some homely advice about drinking too much, insisted on lending me a dollar, for which I was properly thankful. It represented my car fare home, for, placed as I was, I doubt if I could have raised a penny on my name, certainly not without the publicity I wished to avoid. This was the first kindness ever done me by a stranger without payment or hope of reward since my coming into the Lawton fortune; the first tribute, as it were, to myself as a human being. And, thinking this over as I left his humble dwelling, it occurred to me that I was missing much in life.

Not wishing to return to New York until under cover of darkness, I set off aimlessly down the road, golden in the bright June sun. And presently rounding a sharp bend, I came upon a girl and a car, both in distress.

The machine, an expensive two-seater, had had a blow-out, and its owner was eying the result. Evidently her motoring knowledge did not extend to running repairs, and the car had no spare wheel or tire. Evidently, too, her helplessness had reached the point of exasperation, for I saw her give the damaged wheel a hearty kick, while she exclaimed: "There! Take that, you horrid old thing!"

"It's very provoking," I agreed, coming up, "but, somehow, kicking never seems to do it much good."

She started and looked round, having been unaware of my approach. Then she looked me over carefully and severely. "I don't need a philosopher, thank you, but a mechanic. I've been stuck here for at least a week, and you're the first living thing that has come along. I hope Providence has sent some one that knows something about blow-outs. Do you?"

"Blow-outs of all kinds are my speciality, madam."

"I'm only interested in this particular kind. Please stop talking and get busy. I should have been at the station long ago."

She had a very high-handed way with her, but then, too, she was very pretty. I know that every female in distress is supposed to be beautiful, but I can't help that; this one actually was. In fact, she was the girl I had seen the previous night in the town car de luxe, proving conclusively that that incident had really happened. Of course, if I had never seen her before, and if she had been aged, ugly, and infirm, it could not have obviated the necessity of my helping her; but I must admit I would have found considerably less enthusiasm in the performance. Also, I would have worked faster.

"You are very slow," she remarked, as I jacked up the car.

"Slow," I agreed, "but sure. Don't you use powder in your shoes?"

"S-sir!"

"I was referring to the car," I explained humbly, displaying the interior of the shoe.

"Oh!" she said, biting her lip. "I didn't know you called that thing a shoe. Are you sure? And why should you use powder, may I ask?" This very severely and with dignity, as if she still suspected me of undue levity.

So I explained the necessity of powder, while she eyed me doubtfully. "Well, I don't know much about the subject," she conceded. "No more than to drive after a fashion. And the chauffeur we had was very careless. This is the first time I've ever had any vital interest in blow-outs, and I think I can do no better than watch you carefully."

"I usually charge for giving lessons, but on this occasion I waive the fee."

"You are very kind, but I refuse to accept it. I shall pay you." And she sat down on the running board, while I proceeded to affix the patch, not the first I had done, by any means, as Jensen could have testified. If necessary, I could have taken down and reassembled the engine.

"You do it very well indeed," she conceded at length, her head at a critical angle. "Quite like a professional. But it does take an awfully long time, doesn't it?"

"It all depends on the—er—audience."

She pondered this and then decided that there was something offensive about it. Perhaps there was. But then she was really such a pretty girl and, as I have observed, one cannot have too much of pretty things.

"Please hurry," she said coldly. "I should have been at the station by this time. I'm sure I've missed the train. You will oblige me greatly by not dawdling any more. I don't care if it's sure so long as it's quick. All I want is for it to hold me till I get to the station."

"It is very fortunate," I murmured.

"You are impertinent, sir."

"A congenital failing," I confessed.

"Please go away, leave me, if you can't hurry and—and have some manners."

My task reluctantly finished at last, there now happened one of those apparently trivial incidents which so often decide not only the destinies of individuals but of nations, and which, viewed in the light of after events, seem like the working of Providence rather than chance. Much as I might care to prolong this agreeable meeting—agreeable in my estimation—I should have walked down the sunlit road and out of this charming girl's life, had I not instinctively searched my pockets for a handkerchief, something wherewith to wipe my hands. It always pays to be clean, for as I brought out

a bandanna from a side pocket, a sheet of paper came with it and, fluttering in the gentle breeze, fell at the girl's feet—a very appropriate action. She picked it up and was about to hand it to me when some writing which it evidently bore—and which she could not avoid seeing—caught her eye. Her expression changed and she looked at me sharply with a new and, I might say, even proprietary interest.

"Why, you're Joyce!" she exclaimed. "How stupid of me not to have guessed it. I might have known it by the way you fixed that puncture. I suppose it's against the rules of the union to work any faster."

I didn't think her at all stupid and only wished I was equally good at guessing.

"I am Mr. Varney's niece," she added.

"Ah," I said. It was the only safe thing I could say.

She handed me back the paper which she had most obligingly refolded so that I couldn't see a word of what was written on it. "I am Miss Gelette," she said.

"Ah."

"I was on my way to the station to meet you, and you see why I didn't get there."

"Ah."

"I suppose your trunk's at the station?"

"Ah—that is, oh, I mean—ah!"

"Goodness me!" she exclaimed, stamping her foot. "Have you got sunstroke? And have you no manners? Are you rude as well as stupid? Don't you understand that I'm your new employer's niece?"

Yes, my acute intelligence had unerringly reached that conclusion. That paper was the one Mr. Taylor had found in my pocket, and which I had forgotten about. I wished now that I had read it. Tardily enough I removed my cap, clicked my heels together, and imitated Jensen's bow. It is a very remarkable and striking bow; you bend lightly from the hips and then spring back like a child ducking for apples.

"That's better," she conceded. "And now we'd better see about your trunk. Did you tell them to send it on?"

"No, ma'am. You see—well, the fact is I haven't got one."

"What!"

"It went astray, ma'am, but I'm sure it will turn up all right. I've lost more than that—I mean, ma'am, I've lost it more than once and it has always turned up. It's a very hard trunk to lose. They make them that way."

"I don't see how they can. However—let me see, what is your first name? I've forgotten."

"Peter, ma'am."

"Well, Peter, I hope you'll give more satisfaction than your predecessor who left this morning. Now

get that tire or shoe pumped—— Oh, it is pumped? Very well; now take me to the Octagon."

"Beg pardon, but where and what is that, ma'am?"

"It's a hotel in Sea Bright. I forgot you weren't familiar with the neighborhood. Hurry up, now."

A few minutes later we were riding down the back road the way I had come, the road that led to the station and Sea Bright. We passed Taylor's little farm, and if he had seen me he certainly would have wondered how I had got in touch with my employers so soon.

I think Miss Gelette had not forgiven me for having observed her loss of dignity and temper, her assault on the damaged wheel, and my unfortunate remarks. And I think it pleased her immensely to discover that I was the new chauffeur, she mistress and I servant. For she queened it over me with such naïve enjoyment that I should have hated to disillusion her. It was, "Peter, take that turn. Slow down, Peter. To your right, Peter," with a lofty condescension and dignity that tickled me greatly.

We drew up to the big hotel, and she entered, leaving me an order to wait. The season, heightened by the promised coming of the President to the neighborhood, was only beginning, but the verandas were filled with the gay four o'clock throng.

"Well," I thought, "Hewitt and those fellows said I couldn't get a job, and here I am! As for this

fellow Joyce, a fair exchange is no robbery. He's got my car and I've got his. And these folks are better for the deal. I've done them a service, for he would only have robbed them."

The adventure, if such it can be called, was precisely the kind which Hewitt would have classified as peculiar only to myself; irresponsible, freakish, ridiculous—in brief, "One of Pete Lawton's crazy escapades." And very likely he would have added the rider that I wasn't sober.

How far I meant to pursue the incident I had no idea; but even at this stage I had a faint premonition of impending mystery. At least, I couldn't help wondering why the chauffeur Joyce, if he was on his way to fill a good position, and not out of work and desperate, as I had supposed, should conceive the idea of knocking me on the head and stealing my car and all I carried. Where was the necessity, what the sense in doing such a reckless thing? And if he were not expected till to-day's afternoon train, how did it happen I had met him in the neighborhood last night?

While I was thinking over this, Miss Gelette appeared, and we proceeded to do some desultory shopping, a business I generally abhor. And as I was waiting for her at one store, a man came up to the car whom I recognized as Jules, the ex-chauffeur, who had sent me sprawling the previous night, and whose place I now filled. He failed

to recognize me, but he knew the car. Evidently he had been celebrating his discharge in various saloons, instead of going home, and had absorbed just enough to be ugly.

"So you're the new guy that's got the job up to Varney's?" he remarked, eying me disparagingly. "Well, that's all they're fit to have—a cheap bonehead from a correspondence school. They don't know how to treat a high-class man. Huh! A fine house to work for——"

"Look here," I said, finding that the more indifference I assumed the louder he talked, "run away and tell all that to Sweeny. I've troubles of my own."

"Your troubles is only starting," he came back. "See if they ain't." And just then Miss Gelette came out of the store.

Jules turned upon her and proceeded to air his opinions more fully. He called her uncle a doddering old devil, and was starting on her with equally choice epithets when I got him by the slack of the pants and gave him a good running start toward New York. I imagine the crowd that was gathering quickly thought us acting for the movies, for they cheered, and then looked disappointed when I hopped back into the car and drove off.

"Home, Peter. Rumson Road. First turn to the right," said Miss Gelette, with unimpaired dignity, but rather red in the face, and she sat bolt upright

until we had covered several blocks. Then a dimple, whose hidden presence I had suspected, suddenly appeared, and she said in the sweet, gracious voice of last night: "Thank you, Peter. I see that you're going to do capitally, and I reverse my opinion of you; you're sure—and quick. Very quick when you want to be."

We covered another block, and then she added: "That man Jules blames me for his discharge, but he discharged himself by his own conduct. My uncle, being an invalid, is rather short-tempered at times, but he's the best of employers. I'm telling you this because I don't want you to be prejudiced against the position by anything that man may have said. Chauffeurs, satisfactory ones, aren't easy to find these days, as you know."

I thought of the many that had passed through my hands, and I silently agreed with her.

"You will take all your orders virtually from me," she continued, "and if you do your work as it should be done, you won't find me a hard mistress to serve. Jules lost his position through drink, and I'm pleased to know you're a strict total abstainer."

I was filled with some inward confusion, and repressed a strong desire to laugh.

"The abuse of alcohol causes at least half the misery in the world," she went on, "and I must say it speaks well for a young man of your years

that you've the sense to recognize that fact." As I was at least five years her senior, it was very refreshing to listen to this motherly advice.

There followed a period of silence, during which I sensed her stealing more than one glance at me. Many people have looked at me in that stealthy manner, my appearance meriting more than a cursory glance, but I felt that something was troubling her. I was right.

"I think, Peter, that I've seen you somewhere before," she remarked suddenly.

"Indeed, ma'am?"

"Yes, indeed, Peter. I don't know when or where, but I'm quite sure about it. Your face has puzzled me——"

"It has puzzled more than you, ma'am, in its day. It has even puzzled *me.*"

"I don't understand you, Peter; you appear to have a gift for cryptic expressions. But I mean your face is not one to forget——"

"It is not, ma'am," I agreed, "I've tried it and failed. It is like that; you simply can't forget it. I'm puzzled at times to know if it really is a face. I know exactly what you mean, ma'am."

"You don't, not in the least," she said with asperity. "If I thought there was anything remarkably ugly about you, I shouldn't have mentioned it. However, I'm not in the habit of discussing—but I *have* seen you somewhere. I know I have."

"Perhaps it was at the British bulldog show, ma'am. I was there once, with my boss, and a near-sighted old judge tried to give me first prize. Honestly."

"I'm not in the mood for such attempted humor. A thing like this annoys me, not being able to remember. Stop the car!" she finished peremptorily.

I threw out the clutch and clapped on the brakes. Turning in her seat, she faced me with eyes hardening from suspicion to certainty. "You're the man we nearly ran over last night!" she exclaimed. "Don't attempt to deny it, for you are! I *knew* I had seen you before."

I realized that, unfortunately, prevarication was useless. All my great gifts in that direction would be wasted here. This little person was not merely ornamental; she had brains, and knew how to use them. A tongue, too, by the way.

"Last night, ma'am?" I said vaguely. "Nearly run over, you say?"

"Yes, I say it, and you know it."

"I—I must confess I haven't a very clear recollection of what happened last night," I murmured contritely.

"Then I shall tell you; you were drunk!"

"Drunk! You astonish me, ma'am. You do indeed. Is—is it possible?"

"Yes, it is possible, probable, and a fact. You were disgracefully, hopelessly, drunk! You needn't

sit there and pretend you know nothing about it. And Mr. Fremstad assured my uncle that you were a teetotaler! What have you to say to that?"

Having nothing to say, I did not say it. I hung my head instead.

Her eyes were contemptuous, her mouth as stern as its lines permitted. She was very angry and put out. Often I had felt the same way on discovering a jewel of a servant to be the customary paste. I felt sorry for her; I yearned to comfort her, to assure her—quite untruthfully—that I had never been drunk before.

"You chauffeurs are all alike!" she exclaimed. "If it isn't one thing it's another. And the more satisfactory you seem, the worse you are. And so you deceived Mr. Fremstad and hoped to deceive us? Of course, it's quite impossible to engage you. I understand now why your trunk went astray. Well, you had better go and look for it. I can take the car home myself."

I was starting obediently to climb past the wheel when she demanded: "Where are you going now? Sit down, please. Why don't you say something?"

"W-what should I say, madam?"

"Oh, don't be stupid. Haven't you any explanation how you came to be in such a disgraceful condition? Or am I to infer it's your usual condition? I am not a narrow-minded person, and I quite understand that one unfortunate action doesn't

necessarily condemn any one. I can even believe it was your first offense. But I am clearly entitled to an explanation of some sort."

"Well, ma'am, you see it was this way," I began, with proper confusion. "The Benevolent Brotherhood of Motor Mechanics gave their annual outing yesterday. It was very hot, as you recollect, and there was a lot of drinks going round. I was very thirsty——"

"Up to a certain point, I suppose? I can imagine the rest. But how did you happen to be in this neighborhood last night? How did you come to leave Philadelphia?"

"I made a fool of myself, ma'am, and got all muddled up. I got mixed on my dates. I thought I had to come here last night, instead of to-day. I got off at Sea Bright and became lost. You know how it is when you've taken too much——"

"No, I don't know anything of the kind. But you told us you wanted to find New York."

"Did I, really, ma'am? It just shows what a fool I was. I'm sure I meant the Rumson Road. The truth is, I wasn't accountable for what I said."

"I quite realize that. You even imagined the appointment you had to keep was attendance at your own funeral. Where did you spend the night?"

"At a small farm near the station owned by a

man called Taylor." And I told of my assault and robbery, approximately the same version I had given Taylor.

She looked at me steadily for a long moment as I finished: "It was a very disgraceful and humiliating experience, ma'am, which I've taken greatly to heart."

"I'm sure you have, Peter," she said kindly. "I can see that you're not the drinking sort, and that this has been your first slip. Now, see here, if my uncle knew you for the person he met last night, you wouldn't have a chance of retaining the situation. But I know he won't recognize you, for his eyes are nothing like mine." Assuredly they were not. "You saved me from an unpleasant scene back there, and I'm willing to stretch a point in your favor. I shall say nothing to my uncle, but only on one condition—that, while in our employment, you never touch intoxicants of any kind again. I don't ask you to sign the pledge or anything like that. I ask simply for your promise."

And so, in this strange fashion, I came to utter a challenge toward one John Barleycorn, an enemy whose increasing dominion over me I recognized only too well. How most of my friends would have laughed! But it was a promise I gave in all sincerity.

CHAPTER III

I HEAR SOME NEWS

THE Varney residence proved to be one of those modern country houses of the rich that needs no describing. It was less ambitious than some of its neighbors, and sat well in from the road in a good sweep of well-kept ground. The garage was commodious and well appointed, having a repair pit and accommodation for three cars, these including the one I drove, and my old acquaintance, de luxe, with the maroon upholstering. The other was a touring six.

It being the dining hour in the servants' hall when I arrived, I proceeded to make the acquaintance of the domestic staff, this comprising an aged and irreproachable butler called Horace—but to me and other inferiors "Mr. Brandon"—the housekeeper, cook, and upper and lower housemaids. The gardener came from a neighboring florist.

The meal was presided over by Mr. Horace Brandon with more pomp and dignity than attended many dinners I had known in my own circle, and, being familiar in some degree with backstairs etiquette, I produced a favorable impression. I sought after no local information, and was offered none. Contrary to popular superstition, there was

at this table no scandal, no gossip, no picking of their master and mistress to pieces.

The meal over, I washed down the car and retired to my quarters in the garage, armed with the New York evening paper kindly given me by the butler, who approved of the interest I had shown in his remarks on the baseball question. Alone in my room, I sat down to think seriously for the first time of this adventure on which I had entered so lightly and irresponsibly. Surely it was high time I made explanations and apologies to Miss Gelette. On the other hand, there was my wager with Bob Hewitt. Also the incomprehensible action of Joyce, which interested me.

At this point I remembered the letter, undoubtedly the recommendation from Mr. Fremstad, which, returned by Miss Gelette, I had had no opportunity of reading. Joyce, the original owner, must have thrown away or lost the envelope; for had there been one, Tayor would not have opened it. I felt sure of that; he might be only a poor farmer, yet he was one of nature's gentlemen. I now brought the paper from my pocket and read the following:

DEAR MR. VARNEY: This is introducing the bearer, Henry Joyce, whom I mentioned as about to leave my employment owing to my giving up motoring. You will find him thoroughly honest, obliging, efficient, and sober. I have never had a better chauffeur. Yours sincerely,

AUGUSTUS FREMSTAD.

And I had told Miss Gelette my name was Peter! However, that was a small error to what I might have committed. Assuredly Joyce had egregiously deceived his late employer as to the true nature of his character. Toward me he had certainly acted efficiently enough, but hardly with honesty.

And now my eyes fell upon the evening paper, whose pages I had been turning over aimlessly; and I sat up with a jerk, arrested by the following headlines:

Motoring fatality. Peter Lawton, wealthy young clubman, killed by Jersey train. Tragic climax of mad joy ride.

It is not often we have the chance of reading our own obituaries, and my first emotion was that of amusement at the joke played on my friends, coupled with a fleeting compassion for the poor devil, Joyce, who had not profited long by his action. He had been killed that same night at a grade crossing near Camden; my five-thousand-dollar car had been reduced to scrap, while he was so horribly mutilated that identification was only possible by the car license, the clothes he wore, and the papers found in his pocket.

Bob Hewitt identified the latter and other personal belongings of mine, and he told of my leaving

Princeton without Jensen; in short, there was no shadow of doubt that I was dead, and had met a fate which pointed its own moral.

I knew Hewitt had done his best to cast a decent veil over that ride of mine, but others had not, and the whole shameful story had come out, as it was bound to do. This particular paper set out the details with much gusto, and that it was nothing but the truth did not make it more palatable. Here was its opinion of me in black and white, and I can do no better than quote from it.

This tragedy lays another victim at the feet of King Alcohol and Too Much Money. It will be remembered that "Pete" Lawton was the sensational football find at Princeton some half dozen years ago, and held an undisputed place on the all-American team. He graduated with high honors, and promised to attain great distinction in the engineering profession when the death of his uncle brought him into the Lawton fortune. That ended his ambitions, and this last member of an ill-starred family proceeded to go the way of all the others. Of late his mad escapades have been common talk among the knowing, and this catastrophe is the inevitable end.

Yes, we were an ill-starred family, as the paper said, with King Alcohol and Too Much Money our inherited enemies. The combination had killed out

every male member, until only my Uncle Peter and I had remained.

My father dissipated his fortune and died young, while my mother gave her life in giving me mine; thus I was brought up in comparative poverty by distant relatives, and that was what had saved me for the time being. I never expected to inherit a penny of my uncle's fortune. That fortune he also would have scattered to the winds, only he was unable. It was too large for him, and I really believe he left the remainder to me as a parting curse, for my father and he had quarreled, as only our family could quarrel, and he hated me cordially.

On the few occasions when I saw him, while I was working my way through school and college, he made sneering remarks about the benefits of poverty. He appeared to resent the fact that I was in a fair way of making a success of life, instead of following his example and all the rest. He seemed to consider it an insult to the family.

"There never was a male Lawton yet that didn't drink," I remember him saying when he learned I never touched it. "What's the matter with you? It's in your blood, you fool, and you may as well make up your mind it's bound to come out. No use trying to reverse nature. The true Lawton coat of arms is a demijohn rampant on a bar sinister, and the motto: 'Here's looking at you.'

Wait till you've got some money to spend, and you'll see the end of your precious virtue. With all your honest-plowman life and this attempt to dodge your destiny, you'll end your days in a psychopathic ward, as your lamented ancestors ended theirs, as your dear father ended his, and as I shall end mine."

The last part of his prophecy was unfulfilled, however, for he broke his neck by falling out of the ambulance before ever they got him to the hospital. As for the rest, it seemed in a fair way of being realized, something I had once thought utterly impossible.

When I came into Uncle Peter's money—it was six months ago—I voted myself the first real holiday I had ever known. Of course, I meant it to have reasonabe limits. I was going to do an awful lot of good with that money, make it a blessing instead of a curse, and I talked over all my plans with old Mr. Hannay, the Lawton lawyer, who had sole charge of my affairs.

I was going to build and superintend an engineering school for poor young men, irrespective of race, creed, or color, and in a general way I meant to help suffering humanity up hill and down dale, and all around the block.

And then, amid new surroundings and in with an entirely new crowd, I took my first drink. I took it to be a "good fellow," and because I honestly believed I had strength enough to defy all the family

traditions going. I would show the world that alcohol could never make *me* its slave, that it was simply a question of will power, and that a whole lot of nonsense had been talked and written about heredity. "Heredity" and "environment" were simply the excuses of the weak, the cowardly, the vicious.

It was Arnold Frean who brought up the matter and pushed it home. "You're afraid of the stuff," he said. "It shows you're afraid of it, that you know it's your master, when you won't take even one drink. I'll bet you can't take one drink, like any normal man, and then quit. I dare you to try."

"I've worked my way through college," I said, "and into the business world over obstacles you've never known. There's nothing in this world I'm afraid of."

"Tripe!" he retorted. "Talk's cheap. You're a Lawton and that's enough said. You know you daren't."

And so, like a fool, I had my first taste of the stuff. It's a wise man who knows his own limitations and weaknesses. There isn't one in a thousand who likes whisky for its taste; it's the effect most people are after, and it goes without saying that the man who craves the taste of it, as a girl craves candy or ice cream, is naturally the most hopeless case—and I found myself in that class.

I was like a tiger that had sampled human flesh;

nothing else would do me. That one drink was enough. I had inherited a sleeping demon, and, in a moment of stupid vanity, had awakened it. Too late I recognized that I belonged to that class whose only salvation is to leave alcohol strictly alone. Arnold Frean was right; it was my master, and I couldn't take one drink and then stop like any normal person.

As I now thought over the past six months' events, culminating in what had happened last night, I saw that I had come to the parting of the ways, that I had taken half measures too long with my enemy, and if I was to be saved at all, a fight to the finish must begin here and now. Otherwise, far better would it be for me if I had been killed in Joyce's place. And what had saved me? How had I escaped killing some innocent person during that mad ride, even though I had miraculously escaped injury myself? It was through no virtue of mine. Joyce, sober, had been killed, while I, drunk, had escaped. Through some juggling of the gods, I had been given another chance. A tremendous lesson had been brought home to me. Would I have the strength to profit by it?

I realized fully the terrific battle that confronted me; previous skirmishes had shown me that. I would have to throw everything into the scale, for it was John Barleycorn's life or mine.

With the exception of Bob Hewitt and Tommy

Ashton, former classmates, together with old Mr. Hannay, none had thought it worth while to dissuade me from the road I was traveling; and I had not taken kindly to the advice of these three. Mr. Hannay gave it up early, contenting himself with shaking his head. He knew the history of my family, and believed nothing could save me. Hewitt and Ashton, however, hung on. More than once they had urged me to cut the circle I had formed, to go away somewhere and spend only what I earned. But I laughed at them, and then, when they persisted, grew irritable.

I would never confess my secret fears regarding John Barleycorn, never admit he ever got the best of me. For all my "mad escapades," spoken of by the paper, I had never been so helpless as I was last night. I had done many idiotic, reckless things when absolutely sober. It was merely misdirected energy, energy stored up through idleness, and which I had formerly worked off on the gridiron, the classroom, and in the engineering works of Cable & Co., where I was employed when my uncle died.

It was clear that my agreement with Hewitt wasn't so freakish as it might appear; it was simply another effort on his part for my reformation, and circumstances had lent it added force. I realized the truth of his frequent contention that I had got in with a bad crowd. "Half of them are

grafters," he said, "and the rest nothing but money loafers. You're one of these men, Lawton, whose good-fellowship makes them take up with all sorts, and treat them as bosom friends. You'll never make any headway against this enemy of yours until you get rid of his allies—that bunch and too much money. Chuck the whole lot and get to work."

Getting rid of the "bunch" was easier said than done—but what if they believed me dead? Why not remain "dead" and fight out my battle here, unknown, without the handicap of money and influence. Joyce had been killed, and therefore there was no fear of him turning up and exposing me.

The accident had happened near Camden, and none would suspect the substitution that had taken place near Sea Bright, miles away. As for this Mr. Fremstad, it was unlikely that I would ever meet him; but that small risk, together with the chance of being recognized by those who knew me, I must accept.

No one could have been better situated for playing dead; nobody was dependent on me. I had no business, no weighty affairs to attend to; nothing would go to wreck and ruin through my absence. No doubt at this moment Mr. Hannay was shaking his head over my demise and preparing to dispose of the estate according to the terms of my will. But before the slow-moving machinery of the law could come into full effect I would either have

resurrected myself, an undisputed victor over my enemy, or gone down to utter defeat and merited oblivion, for there would be no half measures this time.

In this manner I came to decide upon keeping the name Joyce and the position I had obtained as chauffeur to Mr. Theodore Varney. I have set out my reasons fully for so doing, and to me, at the time, they seemed logical and necessary. Yet if, underneath all, the situation had not appealed to my peculiar sense of humor, if a certain risk had not been attached to it, if Miss Gelette had been aged, ugly, and infirm, perhaps those logical reasons would have appeared less convincing.

I met Mr. Varney that same evening on receipt of a telephone message from the house. He received me in the study, his niece also being present, and at the first glance I realized that for all my helplessness the previous night, I had made some accurate observations; for this was the little, dried-up gentleman whose color was greenish bronze, the like of which I had never seen before.

He was seated in a great armchair before a chessboard, on which was arrayed a problem, a very slippery "twoer" by Loyd, which I recognized as an old friend. Evidently he had spent some considerable time trying to find the key move, with the help of his niece, for as I appeared at the door he said irascibly: "Nonsense, Brenda! Can't you

see if the bishop moves your king is checked? You don't seem able to grasp the first principles of the game, and the longer you play, the worse you get."

"I know I'm very stupid," she answered meekly. "But I only thought that even if the king was checked——"

"You only thought! As if your sex was capable of thinking!"

And then they saw me standing in the doorway.

"Come in, my man," snapped old Varney, and he looked me over at leisure with a pair of eyes which, for all the girl's assurances, struck me as being remarkably bright and shrewd.

For a moment I thought all was lost, that surely he had recognized me, but he only grunted as if satisfied with his inspection, and demanded: "Where is the letter from Mr. Fremstad?"

I was afraid there might have been more than one letter, but, putting a bold face on it, I handed him the only one I had.

"H'm," he said, reading it through, and instantly detecting the error I had fallen into. "I understood from my niece that your name was Peter?"

"Peter Henry Joyce is my full name, sir. Mr. Fremstad preferred to call me Henry."

"Well, Peter Henry, the first thing you have to do is remove that mustache of yours," he said,

with a certain malicious pleasure. "I permit no one in my employment to carry around such microbe breeders and germ disseminators. If you've no thought for your own health, I assure you I have for mine. What are you staring at? Can it be possible you know the classic game of chess?" This with elaborate irony.

"Well, a little, sir. I used to play a bit at the Y. M. C. A. of nights."

"He knows the game of chess, my dear," said Mr. Varney, turning to his niece. "Truly, servants are progressing these days. I shouldn't be surprised if Horace could teach Esperanto and Mrs. Stower"—this was the housekeeper—"give tango lessons. This is an accomplishment, Peter Henry, that Mr. Fremstad forgot to mention. Perhaps you are also an adept at problems and can do me the inestimable service of solving this two-mover?"

"Why, yes, sir," I said, as if unaware of his sarcasm. "It's the move Miss Gelette mentioned—bishop to rook's fourth."

"Oh, no, it isn't," he replied sweetly and maliciously. "I'm afraid the Y. M. C. A. isn't much of a school, Peter Henry. It isn't, because of the very elementary truth that if the bishop moves your king is checked——"

"Quite so, sir. But, if I may point out, you interpose with the knight——"

"And Black takes it, you dolt!"

"But it can't sir, for, of course, you see that it exposes check from the queen—double check and mate."

"Eh?" he cried, staring at the board, his face slowly purpling. Then, with one sweep and the single exclamation, "Damn!" he sent the men flying, knocked over the table, and ordered me from the room.

As I went down the stairs I could hear him angrily declaring to his niece that bishop to rook's fourth was the move he had pointed out from the first, but that she said it was wrong.

That night I shaved my mustache, thankful that Mr. Varney's obsession about microbes thus enabled me to disguise myself, for its removal caused a remarkable change in my appearance, more than I had thought possible. It was none of these Charlie Chaplin affairs, but a good brush, and when I saw myself in the glass, minus it, I doubted if my worst enemy would have known me.

From my interview I realized that Jules might not have been far wrong when he predicted that my troubles were only beginning—though I never guessed the nature and extent of them. Theodore Varney was evidently a hard master to serve, and for all his years and infirmity I had felt a great desire to kick him. He seemed like one of these malicious little bronze devils fashioned by the

heathen, and he spoke to his niece as if she were a feeble-minded nonentity. I knew her to be high-spirited and with a temper of her own, but she had taken it all without a show of protest, though she had colored faintly when she saw I was an observer.

CHAPTER IV

A MORNING OF SURPRISES

THE following morning at ten I was ordered round with the touring car, and Miss Gelette saw me for a moment alone before her uncle appeared. She had to look twice before recognizing me, for now I wore putties and the maroon livery supplied to Jules. It wasn't a half bad fit, though I couldn't bend over without experiencing certain misgivings.

She eyed my shaven lip and said: "I don't know if it's an improvement or not. Did you mind very much?"

"Not a bit, madam. I was thinking of getting rid of it in the hot weather, anyway."

"You're a philosopher, Peter, and very good-natured. I'm so glad you are." And then Mr. Varney appeared, leaning on the gold-knobbed Malacca cane he always carried.

In the bright morning sun his complexion looked more startling and sinister than ever, and, for all his immaculate and youthful foppishness of dress, so haggard and feeble did he seem that instinctively I stepped forward to assist him.

This was a mistake, for he drew himself up and

said angrily: "To your seat, my man! When I need a nurse, I'll engage one." And he strutted down the steps, twirling his cane, like a macaroni of the old school.

I came mighty near losing my job right there, it being on the tip of my tongue to tell him what was on my mind, for my humor wasn't very good that morning, despite Miss Gelette's observation to the contrary. After my half year's holiday, getting up at six o'clock in the morning and overhauling three cars wasn't the joke it seemed the previous night. Nor was I used to being talked to in that fashion. Moreover, the Demon was awake and stirring within me, clamoring lustily for his customary morning drink. The fight to the finish had only commenced, but already I was sparring for wind.

I felt very irritable and despondent as I took the wheel, and, pursuant to a curt command from Mr. Varney, headed for the Ocean Boulevard at a maddeningly sedate pace.

"Not more than seven miles an hour, mind!" he emphasized, tapping me smartly on the shoulder with his cane. "You're at liberty to break your own neck, but not mine."

A mad desire possessed me to seize the cane and throw it in his face, then let out the engine for all she was worth. I was beginning to see the other side of the servant question, and I wondered

guiltily if Jensen and his predecessors had ever felt like smashing me. Could I ever have been so overbearing as old Varney? Perhaps more so, when under the influence of the Demon.

At mention of my real name, I pricked up my ears. Mr. Varney was talking, and I could hear plainly above the soft pur of the engine. He was discussing the previous night's tragedy, reading snatches of the account from the morning paper, which I hadn't seen.

"Well, that's the last whelp of a vile brood gone, and a good riddance," he concluded, with marked satisfaction. "It's the end I always predicted."

"Why, did you know the family?" asked his niece in surprise.

"Yes, long before your time," as if her youth were a defect. "Peter Lawton, this one's father, was at Harvard with me. Married Sally Canning, of Baltimore, against her parents' wishes—she was a noted beauty—broke her heart and died a drunkard at thirty. A bad, worthless lot."

"I don't know," said the girl slowly. "There was nothing ever wrong with them but this, was there?"

"Well, isn't that enough?" he snapped, banging his cane on the floor. "Is it nothing to be a dipsomaniac, and, knowing that, marry an innocent young girl? Is it nothing to beget progeny and perpetuate a degenerate endless chain——"

"I know, uncle. I was only thinking that the first Lawton who started this curse, perhaps hundreds of years ago, was the real culprit. Think of the tragedy of it, of inheriting such a thing through no fault of your own——"

"Pooh! A nice bread-poultice philosophy! Is there no such thing as free will? A fine world this would be if we were to yield to every mad desire! During my long experience I've found that when a blackguard perpetrates some characteristically dirty business, he always lays it to heredity. It's never himself that's to blame, but his ancestors —though they get precious little credit for any virtues he may have. And I say that for Peter Lawton to marry was a blackguardly business. It was a crime, and the State should punish such crimes or make them impossible."

"That's all very well. But if two people love each other——"

"Pooh! If he'd loved her half as well as he loved himself he never would have married her."

It took some effort to sit there quietly and hear my father called a blackguard. Having but the vaguest memory of him, I had no means of knowing that he had been acquainted with Theodore Varney. But as the Canning family had never anything to do with me—I was brought up by an impoverished maiden aunt of my father—it would seem Varney had his facts right when he said my mother married

against her parents' wishes. Indeed, they had never forgiven her, my father, or me. But whether that made my father a blackguard was another matter.

On the whole, however, Varney's remarks did me an immensity of good. They stilled the clamoring voice of the Demon; I forgot about it in my anger at old Varney. I gritted my teeth and swore that I'd show him the "last whelp of a vile brood" was still very much alive, and would *not* end the way he had predicted. I would never touch another drop if only to spite him. Thus a second unexpected ally came to my help in my fight with the Demon; the first was spontaneous liking for Brenda Gelette; the second, spontaneous dislike for her uncle.

The girl having been effectually squelched in her attempted mild defense of my worthless family, they proceeded to talk of other matters; that is, old Varney talked, giving his opinion like a magistrate from the bench, and not caring whether he had an auditor or not.

It was evident that he had read and traveled widely. I gathered that their home was in Philadelphia, but they spoke of high official circles in Washington, and of New Yorkers I had heard of and others I knew rather intimately. It was a caution the way the Varney tongue opened out on most of them; he had piled up a whole library of scandal during his long life, and had forgotten

none of it. He seemed to take a malicious pleasure in saying nasty things about everybody, and the worst of it was I felt they were right. In many instances I knew them to be.

He paid no more attention to me than as if I were part of the car, and when his niece tried to steer him off, or hinted diplomatically that he lower his voice, he raised it the louder and banged on the floor with his cane.

Jules had called him an old devil, and I was ready to concur in the opinion. I wondered why Brenda Gelette put up with him, for assuredly she did not seem the kind that licks dirt for sake of their daily bread or an expected inheritance. But what love could a viper like him engender in any one? And if not love, then was it fear? These were questions I had been asking myself since that interview in the study.

On our way back through Sea Bright, after a funeral procession to the casino in Allenhurst, we stopped at the Octagon drug store—a branch of a well-known Philadelphia house—and old Varney and his niece entered. This was where the girl had gone yesterday.

With characteristic amiability he now remarked he could attend very well to his own business without her help, but she said she wished to do some shopping herself, and so, grumbling, he let her accompany him. He strutted as I had seen him do

before, puffing out his flat chest and swinging his cane as if challenging the universe, and for all my dislike of the man, I felt a pang of sudden pity. I sensed that all this was play acting, a pose to deceive the world. That buoyant step and swaggering manner were as artificial as his teeth.

I am not a person of inspirations, but I got one just then. For all Varney's words about will power, did he possess a Demon like myself? Was he a secret "dope fiend," and did his niece suspect it? I knew precious little about medicine, but it seemed to me that might account for his peculiar color and emaciation; and it would account for his not wishing the girl to accompany him into the store which supplied him through the Philadelphia one.

I was thinking over this hypothesis when that queer sixth sense which we all possess warned me that some one was staring at me, and, glancing up, I saw a man standing on the corner. He wore a leather cap, with motor goggles shoved up over the peak, and he had the high, bulging forehead of a mathematician and the rudimentary chin of a degenerate. As our eyes met, he slowly closed one, whose color put me in mind of skimmed milk.

I looked hastily away, shocked as any old maid, so secure had I felt about my disguise. To the best of my recollection, I had never seen this fellow before, but then, during the past few months, people occasionally spoke to me whom I had no recollec-

tion of meeting previously, for the Demon was not an aid to memory. Clearly this fellow knew me for all my changed appearance, and in spite of the fact that I was supposed to be dead and buried. It would prove rather awkward if he greeted me as Peter Lawton before old Varney, who might appear at any moment.

I kept my head turned away, but, out of the tail of my eye, I saw him leave the corner and come strolling toward me. I heard him coming close to the car, something touched my hand, and when I looked up there he was, going across the street while a small piece of folded paper lay on the seat at my side. He was a clever sort, for I doubt if any watching eye, from among the many that surrounded us, could have detected his deft transference of that paper.

I decided to be equally discreet, and, pretending to examine the magneto, unfolded the little cocked hat and read:

The King's pawn is to meet the Bishop's at Knight's.

Feeling somewhat as did Alice when she went through the Looking Glass and met the Red Queen, I looked round hastily for the man with the bulging forehead, but he had vanished.

"Now is he a chess crank gone insane?" I asked myself, thinking aloud. "They ought to put him in the booby hatch."

"Eh, what's that?" roared old Varney in my ear.

"I—I didn't mean you, sir," I stammered, jumping out and opening the door. "I was thinking of a chess problem."

"Don't talk to me about chess problems," he snapped. "Only idiots play chess, and the only problem you have is how to earn the money I pay you."

I put the note in my pocket and thought of the incident on the way home. "Knight's what?" I asked myself irritably. "Even if the fellow is crazy, why couldn't he name the square and be done with it?"

It seemed to be a morning of surprises, for when I pulled in from the road toward the house, I passed an empty "bobcat" standing at the curb, and when I drew up under the porte-cochère a man of about my own age was coming down the steps. I gave one look, and then ducked, for it was Arnold Frean, the person of all others whom I cared least to see.

"How d' do, Miss Brenda? Hello, there, Mr. Varney!" he exclaimed, coming forward with sleek, bared head and welcoming hand. "What luck! Old Horace was just telling me he didn't know when you'd be back."

The greetings of both the girl and her uncle were cordial; indeed, it was the first time I'd heard old Varney do anything but snap. However, like us all, it was evident he could be very nice when

he so wanted. He called Frean "my boy," and inquired after his family.

"Oh, the folks aren't coming down," said Frean. "They're off to Lenox, and the governor'll be doing good if he can snatch a week-end now and then. I'm down here on my lonely. Been working overtime, and got a bit under the weather. Doctor ordered sea air and the governor voted me a month's holiday. I heard you were trying your first dose of the Jersey coast——" And so he rattled on, with a very engaging ingenuousness which I knew cloaked an experience beyond his years.

I sat stolidly at the wheel, waiting to drive round to the garage when old Varney condescended to alight, and, after his first careless glance, Frean never gave me another. He had not recognized me, but if he was going to prove a frequent visitor during his stay, which seemed quite possible, I determined to run no chances. I would develop "motor eye" and take to wearing goggles.

All in all, things were looking up, and here was something more to take my thoughts off the Demon, for I knew that Arnold Frean had lied to old Varney, and that he was a young man well worth watching.

CHAPTER V

KING'S PAWN TO KNIGHT'S

ARNOLD FREAN came over the next morning in his car, and was out with Brenda Gelette until noon. I viewed the incident with misgiving and dislike, though, of course, it was no earthly business of mine. Perhaps for that very reason I made it my business. Anyway, Frean wasn't the kind that does a girl any good.

My acquaintance with him was of the briefest, but it had left a distinct and unpleasant impression. He was one of the gay crowd I had picked up with after coming into my Uncle Peter's money, his family was a wealthy New York one, and he the only worthless member in it. That he grafted generally I didn't mind, but when he repaid several loans I made him by attempting to cheat at dummy bridge, I grew hot.

"Look here." I said, "if you want money, you've only to ask me, but I object to being robbed, and especially in such a clumsy fashion. A blind man could have seen you stack that deck. I'm not a fool, Frean, except when I want to be."

We were alone in my rooms at the time, the lie was passed, and, after a mild passage at arms, he

owned up to the cheating and begged me to say nothing about it.

"The fact is, Lawton," he said, "I'm hard up. Yes, I know my governor's rolling in money, and that I'm supposed to hold down a good job in his Wall Street office. But we had a row, and—well, I'm hunting a new berth. You don't know what a rotten old skinflint he is. I wouldn't work for him at any price."

I heard later through underground channels that Arnold Frean had been mixed up in a shady brokerage deal, and had only escaped jail through his father's influence. This and an affair with a girl, also hushed up, had capped a long series of "indiscretions," and his sorely tried parent had at last fired him from home and business, lock, stock, and barrel.

It was after the dummy-bridge incident that Frean gibed me into taking my first drink, and I know now, as I suspected then, that it was his oblique method of revenge, for he never deceived me by his apparent contrition and affected friendship; he had tried to rough-house me, and found it a poor business, and I knew he had a knife waiting for me whenever he saw a chance of getting it home.

Understand that I'm not trying to shoulder him with the blame of starting me drinking, and I bore him no ill will on that score. With all the worst intentions in the world, he couldn't have succeeded

but for my help. He simply gauged my inherited failing better than I, and played on my vanity and self-confidence.

I saw little enough of him after that, but I knew positively he had not changed his life for the better, made up the row with his father, or engaged in any legitimate business. Therefore, what he had told Varney was a lie. The elder Frean wasn't one to publish his son's evil doings broadcast, and, as Varney did not live in New York, it was evident he knew nothing of what had happened—or else he knew and condoned it.

I was curious to learn more about Varney himself, but this wasn't easy, it being the first time he had visited that part of the coast, and therefore tradespeople and neighbors' servants—the best news bureaus—knew nothing about him. Nor could I learn anything from the domestic staff, whose members, from Horace downward, were all middle-aged, and not given to discussing their master or mistress. I can't say there was any conspiracy of silence, as if there was something to conceal.

As I was supposed to hail from Philadelphia, to have left the employment of an acquaintance of Varney, I couldn't put any direct questions, and nothing was volunteered. I got the impression of a loyal and clannish band of servants, devoted to their master, and grown old in his service, who regarded me as a new member, taken on probation,

who could not be admitted to the inner circle and the secrets of the house until I had proved myself by faithful service. In brief, such a domestic staff as you don't see nowadays, of the old Southern darky or English retainer type. Yet old Varney seemed hardly the sort to inspire this kind of loyalty and devotion; rather, I wondered he could get any one to serve him, for I heard him speak to Horace, Mrs. Stower, and the equally venerable housemaids, Lena and Mary, just as he spoke to me.

"Nasty old cock, that boss of yours," said Williams, the gardener, who came twice a week. "Looks like a hop fiend. Say, what was wrong with Jules, the other guy that was here? Too much booze?"

"So I understand."

"I thought as much. I told him what would happen if he didn't keep away from Knight's."

"Which?" said I.

"Knight's. Oh, you're new to this part? Well, it's a road house near the Shrewsbury. From what I seen of him, Jules would have been all right if he'd left the booze alone. I feel real sorry for him, for he's one of these rum hounds, I guess, that's got to quit the stuff cold or take the count. You know there's guys like that, eh?"

"I've heard so," I said noncommittally. "It's too bad to have such a failing."

"It ain't a failing; it's a disease," said Mr. Williams. "Jules told me he'd been on the wagon

two years, until he fell off with a bang and began hittin' it up in Philly just before he come here. Got in with a bad crowd, see? And stayed with 'em. I ain't got no use for a guy that gets another guy to booze, knowin' he can't take it like a white man."

I agreed with this excellent sentiment, and that evening asked Miss Gelette if I might have an hour or so off. She attended to all such matters instead of Mr. Varney, who took little to do with the running of the house.

"Certainly," she said. "Of course, Friday is your regular evening. I suppose you wish to see about your trunk?"

"No, not exactly, ma'am."

"But don't you think you should? It's about time you did."

"The fact is, ma'am, I don't think it will ever turn up; it's lost this time for good. I don't remember anything about it, ever getting it expressed or put on the train." Which was the literal truth.

"I don't see how you could have lost it, Peter."

"Why, ma'am, I even lost myself!"

"Well, that's true." And she smiled. "In that case you will need to be buying some things. Here is a week's wages," handing me two ten-dollar bills and a five. "Now remember, Peter, your promise to me. Above all, keep away from a place called

Knight's. It has a bad name and was the ruination of Jules."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but that's just where I'm going."

"To Knight's? And after my telling you the sort of place it is?"

"I can't help that, ma'am; I've got to go."

"You don't; nothing of the sort! However," suddenly checking herself, "it is no affair of mine. Of course you can do what you please, go where you like, after hours. And you're not precisely a child."

"I'm not going there to drink," ma'am."

"Oh," she said, looking mollified. "What are you going for then?"

"To see about a chess problem."

"A chess problem!"

"Yes, ma'am, I've an appointment there with a fellow I knew in Philadelphia—I saw him this morning in Sea Bright—and he's very keen on the game, too. He has a problem for me."

She looked at me for some time in silence. "It was honorable of you to tell me you were going to Knight's, and it does you great credit that you're so fond of such an intellectual pastime as chess. But I wish this friend of yours had picked some other place to discuss problems. It's only putting temptation in your way. However, that is your affair, not mine. You must bear in mind that you

won't have a second chance if there is a repetition of what happened the other night. You understand?"

"Yes, ma'am. But I mean to keep my promise. If I may say so, it seems to me that running away from a thing never did much good. I mean, ma'am, you can't call yourself a victor simply because you've never given the other fellow a chance to beat you."

"And in this instance the other fellow is——"

"Mr. Barleycorn, ma'am."

"Oh," she said. "Then—then that affair of the other night *wasn't* your first experience? Come, Peter, I want the truth."

"I mean you to have it, ma'am. That's been my failing, though Mr. Fremstad knew nothing about it. Mr. Barleycorn has floored me more than once, but now I've taken him on for a finish fight."

"I hope you win it," she said. "In fact you must. Of course temperance in all things is only a means to an end, Peter, but a failing like that, if not taken in time and fought to a finish, becomes such a frightful vice. As you say, it is a bigger and better thing to face the enemy and beat him; yet it's a wise man who knows when to run."

"I'd rather face it, ma'am. I can't be running away from every gin mill I meet. I intend to win this fight. I've given you a promise, ma'am, and I mean to keep it."

She looked at me for a moment, and then, as if satisfied, dismissed me with the injunction to be home before eleven.

And so the King's pawn set out to meet the Bishop's at Knight's as per written instructions. I knew far better than Miss Gelette the temptation I was deliberately courting, but I had steeled myself to meet it. Something, too, far stronger for the moment than the Demon urged me on—curiosity and love of adventure.

Knight's seemed to be well, if not favorably, known, for I got minute directions from the first passer-by, and a short ride in the trolley brought me almost to its doors. It was a garish place of the cheaper class, displaying an electric sign, showing what purported to be a knight on a charger, and it had the inevitable open-air restaurant with a boisterous piano and several gentlemen of color who posed very badly as musicians. The main building had a pool room and bowling alley opening off the bar, while upstairs there were rooms to let, with or without board.

I went into the open-air restaurant—though so styled, it was little more than a beer garden—had a look at the various couples, dodged the attentions of several vulpine waiters, had a peep into the pool room and bowling alley, and then entered the bar.

Here I was face to face with the Demon in his lair, and the mere smell rose up and took me by

the throat. I need not try to analyze my feelings, all I suffered. If you've ever had the craving, you'll know what I mean; if you haven't, then nothing I might say would give you an adequate idea. Just think of any normal desire you've had when it has reached the aching point, then double it twice over.

I'll admit I had to conjure up and take a firm grip of everything I held sacred—such as my promise to Miss Gelette—to keep me from making a bolt right there for the bar and drinking my back teeth awash; but I fought it down and looked round for the man I had come to meet. I didn't see him, however, among the fair-sized crowd, and I was thinking the suspicions I had formed were all wrong when a curiously dead voice at my elbow whispered: "The Bishop's pawn."

I turned to confront the man with the bulging forehead, rudimentary chin, and pale-blue eyes, eyes that were as lifeless as his voice. He was dressed now in sober black, and, with his colorless face, he somehow put me in mind of such cheerful things as the mattock and the shroud. Indeed, he looked what a gravedigger is supposed to look like, but seldom, if ever, does.

"The King's Bishop's pawn," he repeated, in the same discreet, dead voice.

"The King's pawn," I answered, aware I was supposed to say something.

Evidently this was the correct formula, for he motioned me politely to a table in an obscure corner of the back room, and called a waiter. I was about to remark that I was "off the stuff" when he saved me the trouble by asking gravely whether I preferred ginger ale, root beer, or lemon soda. "For myself," he added, "I take buttermilk whenever I can get it. It's really excellent here."

So I said to make it two and the waiter brought a three-pint pitcher and a dish of pretzels. I marveled that such an order could be served in the place, but as we were served without bloodshed, it would seem that this wasn't my companion's first buttermilk orgy at Knight's. Of course, after a thick night, buttermilk is the best thing one can drink; so no wonder they had it in stock. Doubtless it was in frequent requisition by the patrons.

"Your name, I understand, is Joyce?" said my companion politely when we were alone.

"Yes, that's right. And yours?"

"Corby," he replied, raising his lifeless eyes to mine.

There is a peculiar suitability in some names; but then this might be an assumed one. Or perhaps he was unaware that the Scotch call a crow or raven a corbie. "Muckle black corbie"—that's what he looked; a carrion crow, a foul bird of ill-omen.

"You come from headquarters?" he pursued.

"Yes, that's right. And you?"

"New York."

It followed then that headquarters, whatever that might represent, wasn't in New York. Where was it?

He raised his glass and murmured softly: "The Black Company."

"Long may she wave!" said I heartily.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Merely a figure of speech, Mr. Corby—like the black flag, you know. *Vive le* Black Company! Here's to it." And we pledged the sentiment in buttermilk.

"You haven't been with us long, Mr. Joyce?"

"No, not very—that is, comparatively speaking. You see, what may seem long at one time may seem short at another; it is merely a matter of conditions and circumstances," I replied, aware that the skating was pretty thin, and feeling exhilarated at the possibility of crashing through up to my neck at any moment and without warning.

"And yet," he said meditatively, "you're attached to the King himself."

"Quite so," I agreed, endeavoring to look more important. "As you say, the King himself."

"You must have made good right off the reel and in no uncertain way."

"Quite so; of course. Certainly."

"In what particular way, may I ask?"

"That, Mr. Corby, is a deep secret. I simply can't tell you," I replied with refreshing candor. "It is a secret between—er—well, you understand?"

To my relief he did, though I didn't. He nodded. "You mean the King?" And he regarded me with increasing respect.

"Quite so; the King—God save him. Let us drink to the King, Mr. Corby."

We had another go at the buttermilk, a cold-blooded, miserably unresponsive beverage, especially when one is after information. You cannot get excited and enthusiastic over buttermilk; it doesn't unloosen tongues and fill one with good-fellowship, make you forget the rent is overdue, or anything like that. I believe the death of Cæsar was plotted on buttermilk. Now a good bottle of the stuff that killed father—I could drink Mr. Corby under the table, and Corby, for all his present passion for buttermilk, was no natural-born milk fiend. I guessed that; I knew his type—the pale kind of souse that can lap up hooch like a sponge. If he wasn't taking it, he had a good reason; perhaps he was just getting over a burst. But if I persuaded him? He had nothing on me when it came to punishing redeye; not for nothing had I and my family paid homage to King Alcohol. To warm this human refrigerator sitting opposite me, to unloosen his tongue, to make him glow and enthuse over this

mysterious adelphia and part with further information—surely I was justified! I had always drunk for pleasure, but this would be business, a sacred duty.

And then I remembered my promise to Miss Gelette and knew that the Demon, with his usual specious arguments, had been trying to get to windward of me again. He had thought to take me in an unguarded moment and by this new device. Moreover, the thought came that if Corby's total abstinence was enforced, then mine might be expected to be so too. It might be a cardinal rule of this secret society that such measures were obligatory at certain times—say, while its members were on active duty, carrying out some undertaking. By ordering whisky, and persuading Corby to indulge, I might awaken suspicion if not actually betray myself.

So I returned to my buttermilk, with an inward grimace, and, as it turned out, I had no need of artificial stimulant—virtue being thus rewarded for once—for Corby obligingly parted with more information of his own volition, and very astonishing information it was.

"I'm down here in charge of a new member," he said. "Of course you've heard of him?"

"Oh, yes; certainly."

"You saw him at the house?"

Had I? I tried to think of all the people who

had called at the Varney's. But was it their house he meant?

"I mean Frean, of course," said Corby.

"Oh, of course," said I. "Yes, I know him, but he doesn't know me. I mean he doesn't know I'm a member."

"No, of course," said Corby again. "Were you not instructed as to that?" raising the dead eyes to mine.

"No," I said boldly, seeing it was a case of plunging. "I was told nothing about him."

"You will in good time. I don't think I've exceeded instructions in telling you now. You know the precautions against possible treachery that we must take with new members before they've been thoroughly tested. The idea is for you also to be a watch on him without his knowing."

"I see; a very good idea. No doubt my orders to that effect will come later. You knew me, of course, because of my being with old Varney?"

"Certainly. We finished a good job, begun through headquarters, with your predecessor." And he smiled in his melancholy fashion.

I was afraid to put any further questions, the man being no fool if that forehead of his went for anything, and after an aimless general conversation, principally about motor cars, he finished off the last of the buttermilk and proposed a rubber of pinochle. This was played without stakes, very

cleverly on his part, but in the lifeless way peculiar to him. Then he murmured that he would have to be getting along, and, our riotous evening at an end, we adjourned to the sidewalk.

He accompanied me into Long Branch, and then gave me a hand like a dead fish. "Good night, Mr. Joyce. Friday evening is your regular one off? Then you will always find me on that evening at Knight's."

"Where is Frean stopping?"

"At the Queen, here." I knew this to be the name of a local hotel, so he wasn't referring to another piece on the strange chessboard. "I'm his chauffeur. You'll know not to recognize me, of course, until we meet in the regular way. Even then it won't do to be seen too much together, and until you get your orders, be sure not to let Frean see that you know him. It might get me in hot water at headquarters."

He left me, and when I got home, Horace informed me that Miss Gelette wanted me to fix an incandescent in the drawing-room.

I soon saw that this business about the light was only an excuse, that Miss Gelette wished to see for herself if I had kept my promise; for as I put in the bulb, she came and stood very close to me as though to catch the aroma of John Barleycorn or any disinfectant I might have used, so close indeed that it was all I could do to keep

from kissing her. I am really not given to promiscuous embraces, nor philandering in any form, but when a very pretty and charming girl—— However, you've been in the same position yourself and know the temptation.

"You're home early, Peter," she said, apparently satisfied and pleased when she saw I was eminently sober. "I see you are to be trusted. Well, did you see your friend and get the chess problem?"

"Yes, ma'am. But I haven't solved it yet."

"Is it so difficult then?"

"Yes, a real brain-twister, ma'am."

"You must show it to me some time," she smiled. "I'm very fond of the game myself. By the way, are you a strong player?"

"Pretty good, ma'am. Of course, it all depends on my opponents."

"I think you're too modest, Peter. I've an idea you're a very good player, that you must have a natural gift for the game; for, of course, you can't have had the opportunity of playing much. And so I'm going to ask you something. It is possible that my uncle will want you to play with him some night. He's a crank on the game and will play with anybody he can find—if he thinks he can beat them. You understand?"

"Yes, ma'am. I've met players like that—and not only at chess. It's a fine game so long as they always win."

"Well, Peter, if you can beat him, will you try not to? I'm quite sure you're clever enough at the game to lose it in such a way that he'll never suspect. You'll put up a good fight; but you'll let him win, won't you?"

"Certainly, ma'am, if you say so; and of course, he may be able to beat me without any faking."

"I'm sure he can't; he's not half so good a player as he thinks he is—though I wouldn't let him know that for the world. If you let him beat you, it will mean nothing to you, but a great deal to him—and to me. You won't forget, Peter? Thank you so much. Oh, and another thing, Peter; please don't try to help him, as you did the other morning. It was very good of you, but he doesn't like it."

Alone in my room, I thought over my meeting with the Bishop's pawn and the problem he had set me. I was reckoned a very strong player, having played top board for my university, but here was a chess game of another kind into which I had stumbled, thanks primarily to getting drunk. The interview at Knight's confirmed the suspicions I had been forming since the receipt of that strange message, and now, with pencil and paper, I set to work on the problem. Here is what I evolved:

A secret society known as the Black Company, whose members represent the black set of chessmen, therefore at

least sixteen in number—viz., King, Queen, two Bishops, two Knights, two Rooks, and the eight Pawns. They are black, say, because it represents evil, and they play against the white—meaning good—which may stand for Society in general

The headquarters are in Philadelphia, but its members are scattered over different cities, and some of the pawns aren't known to one another by sight, because it is clear that Corby can't ever have seen Joyce. It's not a case of "doubles," for though Joyce approximated my height and weight, color of hair and mustache, Hewitt would have known unquestionably it wasn't I, if the remains hadn't been so badly mutilated. These pawns are attached to and serve under the orders of the various subleaders—Bishops, Knights, Rooks.

For some reason, at present quite obscure, it was planned to replace Jules, Varney's chauffeur, by a member of the Black Company. To this end, and in order that his discharge would occur naturally, they discovered and played upon his old weakness for drink. Begun in Philadelphia, it was finished here. Joyce, the King's pawn, came to take his place, probably on forged recommendation papers.

Queries: Of precisely what nature is the Black Company? Is Theodore Varney a member? If so, why the campaign to get Joyce placed here? Was it to deceive his niece or some one else?

Why did Joyce act as he did, instead of coming here to fill the position? Did he get cold feet at the last moment, is such defection punishable by death, and did he try to make his escape, changing his identity to mine?

This is a feeble explanation, but the only one I can advance at present.

How long can I play the rôle of Joyce? Clearly, if I make no mistakes, until such time as a member appears who knew him by sight. Perhaps long enough for me to discover and checkmate whatever move they're up to. They don't know that Joyce is dead and buried under my name.

After some further speculation, which led me nowhere, I destroyed the paper and went to bed, where I dreamed that Corby, a gigantic and animated black bishop, was trying to drown me in a vat of buttermilk.

CHAPTER VI

I ACQUIRE VARIOUS INFORMATION

BY the sober light of morning, if I had been inclined to regard the Black Company as a myth, and the man Corby as a harmless lunatic, such thoughts would have been dispelled by a letter which came to me through the mail. It was postmarked Germantown, which, as you may know, is a suburb of Philadelphia, but the single sheet of paper bore no address nor date.

It contained merely what purported to be a typewritten game of chess in the algebraic notation, and at the bottom was appended the letter and numeral, E8—which had nothing to do with submarines or torpedo boats.

Here, then, was my first message from the head of the Black Company, for there was no doubt that this was their secret code, bearing the King's signature. Obviously, this code was only used when there was danger of messages falling into alien hands; thus there had been no necessity for Corby to employ it in his note to me.

To those who are familiar with the algebraic notation, I may explain it briefly. Beginning with White's queen's rook's square—the first square on

the left-hand side of the board if you play White—the eight squares across the board are lettered from A to H, while down the board they are numbered from 1 to 8; thus each of the sixty-four squares has its own letter and number. T1 representing the White king's square, E8 is therefore the Black king's. It is unnecessary to give the entire game as it appeared, but the opening moves were those of the Ruy Lopez, Morphy Defense, and were as follows: 1. Pe4, Pe5. 2. Ktf3, Ktc6. 3. Bb5, Pa6—and so on for a matter of twenty odd moves.

It may be seen at a glance the possibilities in this for a clever code, utilizing both letters and number, whose apparent innocence would disarm suspicion. And though I have dabbled extensively in cryptograms and secret writings of all kinds, such things appealing to my mathematical bent, I may say here that, to my knowledge, this was the first time such ingenious use was made of the algebraic notation. That it held a secret code I was sure, from the significant fact, aside from all else, that no such game could ever have been played, the majority of the moves being quite impossible. They were there merely for the necessary purpose of the code, though this fact would not be detected except by a chess player trying over the game.

I had the code, but to read it without the key was another matter, and try though I did, familiar as I was with many, and the methods of detection,

this one baffled me completely. I set my wits to working, and the result was a pair of handsomely inflamed eyes produced by a little elbow grease and black pepper. Heroic measures, perhaps, but they looked far worse than they were.

"Mercy!" exclaimed Miss Gelette, as I appeared with a pair of smoked goggles, bought the previous evening in anticipation of a close scrutiny from Frean. "What's the matter, Peter?"

"Motor eye, ma'am," I said, giving her a look. "I get it now and then. No, doctors are no use, thanking you all the same. There's nothing for it but smoked glasses till it wears off. I can still drive, though."

"You won't have to to-day, at any rate," she said.

Just then Frean drove up, with Corby sitting in the rumble. Frean gave me a good stare as he passed into the house, and I loafed out, presumably to have a look at the car.

"My lamps have gone bad," I said to Corby, raising the goggles to verify the statement. "I've just had a code message from headquarters. Will you read it? It's nothing but a blur to me."

"Stand between me and the house and slip it to me," he said.

I passed him the paper, and he decoded it quickly from memory, writing it on the back. "Be sure to destroy it," he said, slipping it to me as Frean

and the girl came out of the house. And when they reached the car, they found a couple of chauffeurs, chance met, talking shop.

Alone, I had a look at what Corby had written:

Keep an eye on new member Frean, and report first hint of treachery.

This was no more than Corby had told me at Knight's, and my hope of learning something further about the Black Company thus came to naught. All the same, I now possessed a valuable weapon—the key to the secret code, for with Corby's translation as a working guide, I at length hit upon the method used. In future I would have no trouble with messages.

That evening, as Miss Gelette had predicted, old Varney did me the honor of asking me to play chess with him. He had called it an idiot's game, but, having recovered from his rage at the problem he couldn't solve, he was back at his old beloved vice. I could see that the game was a vice with him, like drink or gambling, and that for its sake, he was ready to waive even class distinction, implacable Bourbon though he was.

It was his only pastime so far as I could see; he had no visitors but Frean, no companionship but that of his niece, and, save for a daily sedate motor ride, when the weather permitted, spent all his time shut up in the study, browsing among his

impressive collection of books, of which chess manuals were no small part.

"Well, Peter Henry," he said, rubbing his yellow claws, "we'll see if you're as good a player as a problem solver. But tell me, had you ever seen that two-mover before? I thought so." He chuckled maliciously. "You simply got the answer out of a book, I'll be bound. Well, I give you choice of men. Which will you have?"

"Black, sir. I'm partial to the Black Company," watching him covertly, but he gave no sign that this had a hidden meaning for him.

He proved a better player than problem solver, but even so, I should have beaten him with little effort and much pleasure, had it not been for his niece's request. However, I pushed him hard for over an hour, and then let him pull off a pretty but unsound mating combination, into which I had helped maneuver myself.

The change that took place in him during the game was really wonderful; his mummified look slowly disappeared, his eyes sparkled, his cheeks flushed, and he looked twenty years younger. All the venom and bitterness of the man was sponged out, and when he called mate it was not with malice, but with the naïve delight of a child proud of its own successful efforts.

"See here, my dear. Look at this!" he exclaimed

to his niece, who entered just then. "A brilliant, a gem, not unworthy, I think, of some of Morphy's or Capablanca's." And he proceeded to point out and explain the combination which had led to my downfall.

If she detected its unsoundness, she gave nothing but praise, expressing an admiration and delight equal to his own. "Then it was a good game, uncle? I knew it must be, because you were so quiet."

"An excellent game!" exclaimed Varney, beaming and rubbing his hands. "One of the best I ever played. This young man is a worthy opponent, and, after he has learned the finer points, should be ready to tackle anybody. Peter Henry," he went on, with great formality and courtesy, "I beg to withdraw any slurs I may have cast on your teachers and your knowledge of chess. Unfortunately, I've the devil's own temper at times, and you must not mind an old man's evil humors. Brenda, my dear, will you make a note of the fact that Peter Henry's wages are raised seventy-five dollars per month?"

"But I'd rather not, sir, if you don't mind," I hastened to say. "I play for love of the game and I don't want or expect any extra pay. I couldn't think of it, sir."

"That's all very good," he replied; "but extra

service is entitled to extra pay. Now that's enough; you speak well, but no man serves me for nothing. This isn't our last game by any means; I shall take pleasure in demonstrating to you, in actual play, the finer points."

"That's very good of you, sir."

"Not at all," he said with a regal gesture. "Your skill makes you worthy of being my pupil; I'll take pleasure in coaching you. You play a very sound game, and if I do say so myself, it is no humiliation to be beaten by me. Capablanca himself might be excused for falling a victim to that last mating combination. A gem, a brilliant!" And he turned again to the board, chuckling and rubbing his hands as he pondered anew the clever trap I had helped to set and spring.

This, then, was the beginning of a change in my attitude toward Theodore Varney, and I was soon convinced that my ideas regarding him must be altogether wrong, for Miss Gelette spoke to me fully the following day.

"Peter, you're a jewel," she said in her impulsive, unreserved way. "I know very well you conspired to bring about that 'brilliant,' to have yourself beaten after a most exciting game. You kept your promise. I don't know how you were able to do it without giving yourself away. You must be a far better player than I thought. At

any rate, the result is that you've put him in the best humor I've seen for months."

"It did seem a bit of a tonic, ma'am. He's quite chipper to-day."

"Yes, you've done him more good than a dozen doctors. The mind can conquer the body. You haven't a gift for asking questions, Peter—which is another thing I like about you—and we are a close corporation here, as no doubt you've discovered. But I wish you to know now just what is wrong with Mr. Varney; it will help you to understand and condone things. I'll speak frankly, for I've found you are to be trusted. I told you my uncle was something of an invalid, but the truth is, he's a hopeless one, a sufferer from Addison's disease. Have you ever heard of it?"

"No, ma'am, I can't say I have. I've heard of Addison, of course——"

"No, no, it's not that one. I had never heard of this disease either; I don't think many people have. It's very rare and peculiar, known also as Bronze Skin, and it isn't infectious or contagious, you understand. The symptoms are a gradual darkening of the skin, increasing emaciation, and debility. There is no cure. There is nothing to do but grin and bear it—to the end. Peter, do you understand?" she finished, with misty eyes. "You see yourself growing a little darker, a little weaker

every day, a little more repulsive, a stride nearer the grave—and nothing can be done. Nothing!"

"It must be very hard," I said. "Hard, too, for those who love him."

"It is, Peter. Think of one of your own loved ones dying slowly before your eyes, and you knowing that all the care, all the money and skill in the world are of no avail. It's the knowledge of one's helplessness, the inexorable and insidious progress of the disease that's so maddening."

"You've had the best specialists?"

"Yes. So many, in fact, that Mr. Varney can't bear the sight of a doctor. He knows that he's doomed, but, having always enjoyed the best of health, and having led a very active life, he refuses to let the world see how hard he is hit. He pretends nothing is wrong, and we must pretend, too. That is why he came down here where he wasn't known—to get away from the sympathy of friends, the vulgar curiosity of others. He has a very rare disease, and is therefore to be stared at and questioned, watched and examined by doctors, as if he were a clinical subject. He has become hypersensitive, and you mustn't let him see that you know; you must help to play the tragic farce. You will, won't you, Peter? And you won't mind if, when he has his bad days, he says spiteful things he doesn't mean? He's suffering, you know; suffering all the time."

"He may say anything he pleases, ma'am, if it helps him any."

"Peter, I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Mr. Fremstad for having that accident and in consequence giving up motoring. I say this, even at the risk of spoiling you. All the other servants have grown up, you might say, in our service, but the chauffeur's position has always been a worry and nuisance. None of them could stand my uncle's sharp tongue, and I'm sure I couldn't blame them at times. They had no opportunity of knowing, like the other servants, what a really good and kind man he is at heart. He pretends to be a cynic, but is one of those who likes to jeer at the world, while carefully hiding all the good he does. His nature has been warped through a very keen disappointment and sorrow he experienced long ago, and which he has never got over; this, added to his present physical suffering, makes him appear quite a different sort of character than he really is."

The growing favor in which I found myself with Varney and his niece was soon reflected in the servants' hall. Sympathy with their master and the willingness to enter into the "tragic farce" was evidently the passport to their confidence, and I gathered enough material at various odd times wherewith to piece together the family history.

It was quite innocent and intensely respectable, hinting of nothing dramatic, let alone such a bizarre

concern as the Black Company. The family was an old Philadelphia one, and Varney's fortune was inherited. He had never engaged in business, was always something of a recluse, but had done an immense amount of philanthropic and educational work without his name appearing or any sort of advertising. He was a bachelor, and a brother and his niece were his only relatives. Brenda Gelette was an orphan, had made her home with him since early childhood, and was wealthy in her own right. She was devoted to her uncle, and had cheerfully given up all social pleasure and the society of friends when Varney was stricken with his peculiar and deadly complaint.

To sum up, I was presented with a very human, simple, and not unheroic picture; an old man, soured by youthful disappointment, yet sweet at heart, goaded by pain and his impending doom to fierce invective against even those whom he loved best. A man of unconquerable pride and spirit, who was dying on his feet, and dying game. A body of loyal and devoted servants, and a niece whose self-sacrifice stopped at nothing.

It was a picture whose immediate truth, as it slowly unfolded itself to me, there was no denying, and my theory that Varney was a "dope fiend" and a member of a sinister secret society had to go overboard wholesale. Yet that there was some con-

nection between him and those styling themselves the Black Company was self-evident, and if they were not with him, then they must be against him; if they were not his friends, then they must be his enemies.

CHAPTER VII

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS

IT was nearing the end of the third week, and I had got no "forrarder" with the Black Company. No other messages in the algebraic notation had followed, and though I went to Knight's on Friday evening to absorb buttermilk and play pinochle with Corby, I learned nothing further. We drank solemnly to the Black Company, but that was all that was said about it.

Indeed, I could well believe myself the victim of a hoax or that Corby was a lunatic, were it not for the man himself. That dead-white face of his, with its bulging forehead, fishy eyes, and small, pointed chin, that passionless, exact manner, began to get strangely on my nerves.

The more I saw of him the more convinced I was that, sane or not, whether the Black Company was the single aberration of an otherwise sound intelligence, and he himself had sent me that code message, the fellow was a degenerate and scoundrel. This conviction was conveyed to me by nothing he said or did, for his conduct and language couldn't have been more circumspect. It was simply the indefinable and sinister aura he projected, that of

the simon-pure enemy of society doomed by heredity to the ways of crime.

I felt that here was a man who would do murder in the same passionless and efficient manner he played cards—and the doing of it would trouble him just as little. That he was no roistering villain, the sort that kills in the heat of fury or drink, made him all the more dangerous. Nor was he the type of politico-social or religious fanatic; no wrongs, fancied or otherwise, of race, class, or creed would ever obsess him. If he pursued the ways of crime, it would be simply and wholly for profit. I suspected intemperate depths to him which his buttermilk diet belied; a nature which, when the need of self-repression had gone, would delight to wallow in abysmal abominations.

Granting the existence of a blackmailing society, I got no support for the theory that it was preparing to terrorize Mr. Varney out of a certain sum of money. Equally futile appeared the one that for some reason he was marked down for vengeance. True, I was supposed to be an accredited spy in his household, yet I reported nothing; nothing was demanded of me but to help keep an eye an Frean.

Almost three weeks had passed, and nothing was happening. Yet I was conscious that all the time a whole lot might be going on underground, of which I was supposed to know everything, but

in reality knew nothing. Perhaps the hour for my active participation had not arrived.

Until that hour came, until I learned something definite, I considered it useless to hint of my suspicions to any one. If Varney was an ex-member of the Black Company, marked down for some past treachery, he would certainly deny the fact, even though in fear of his life. If there was another and less respectable side to the philanthropic-educational medal he had worn for so long, he would continue to hide it strenuously from his niece and the world. I had really nothing to offer but unsupported testimony that Jules' discharge had been engineered, and that would mean I must confess I wasn't Joyce. For this I wasn't prepared.

Naturally, I couldn't play my present rôle forever, but I was in no hurry to advance the day of confession. The arguments which had induced me in the first instance to assume the rôle had grown stronger, if anything, with advancing time. I was waging a good fight with the Demon, and in no small measure was helped by my surroundings. The courage with which old Varney fought his losing battle against a far more terrible demon than mine—Demon Death—was inspiring, while the faith and confidence reposed in me by Brenda Gelette was a great asset.

No doubt because we were almost of an age, and she had no youthful company, Frean excepted, Miss

Gelette got into the way of talking to me intimately. Then, one day, she began putting questions about myself: What I had done before working for Mr. Fremstad, and how I had acquired an education which she pronounced above the ordinary.

"One would think you had been to college," she said.

"You flatter me, ma'am."

"Quite unintentionally then, I assure you. Come, were you never at college?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am."

"There, I knew it! Which?"

"U. of P., ma'am; Brown, Swarthmore, Yale."

"What! You're fibbing, Peter; you know you are. You simply couldn't have gone to all those."

"Why not, ma'am? They aren't far apart and it only took a few days. My old boss—not Mr. Fremstad—made a tour of them and I drove the car. They are very nice places, ma'am."

"I don't care for your sense of humor," she said, a spot of color in her cheek. "I think I've remarked that before. You aren't bad, Peter, when you don't try to be funny. In any case, I think you have an education that entitles you to something better than driving somebody else's car, but no doubt I'm mistaken."

"No doubt, ma'am."

"No, I'm not mistaken! Don't contradict me,

Peter. I won't allow it. I say you have an excellent education; anybody could see that; it crops out all the time. It isn't lack of education in your case; it—it's downright laziness, mental laziness and lack of ambition; it must be that. Why you should be content—but it's the complaint of many young men nowadays. To work with your hands instead of your head; to accept an easy well-paid—but you haven't told me what you were before becoming a chauffeur."

"No, ma'am, I haven't."

She waited a moment, then demanded: "Well?"

"Well what, ma'am?"

"I say what were you? Goodness gracious, can't you understand a simple question? What did you do? Where did you work?"

"Oh, various places, ma'am, and at various things."

"And at various times under various people, I presume. How intelligible!" she excaimed, the red deepening in her cheek. "Oh, very well. But surely if I condescend to ask a few questions you may condescend to answer them."

"I am sensible, ma'am, of the great favor done me by your interest."

"*My* interest?" She laughed quite unpleasantly. I had never thought her capable of such a laugh. "You are quite mistaken, Peter. I have absolutely

no interest in you, your past, present, or future." For some reason she was very angry. "Is that quite plain?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You are becoming spoiled," she continued. "You think you are indispensable because you've been promoted from the garage to the study, thanks solely to my uncle's mania for chess. Oh, yes, you do. I've seen it coming on, but I wish to point out that you mustn't forget you belong properly to the garage, not the study."

"I'll bear it in mind, ma'am."

Her foot began tapping. "And if you belong there, it's entirely your own fault; you have elected —however, what I wish to point out and impress on you is that if any one is remotely interested in you at all, it is my uncle. You have managed to amuse him, and he has been good enough to say you should be fit for something better than a servant—that is, if you had a spark of ambition. Not, of course, that I agree with him. But that is his opinion. So acquit me of any personal interest or vulgar curiosity in your private affairs. Of course they are less than nothing to me. I merely wished to find out for Mr. Varney, if possible, why you are not occupying a position to which he evidently thinks your abilities entitle you. That is all."

"It is very good of Mr. Varney," I murmured, my eyes still on the wind shield.

"It is," she agreed. "Very."

She returned to the attack when I thought the battle was over. "If you persistently refuse to say anything about your past, one can't help thinking there must be something to conceal, of course. You successfully deceived your former employer regarding one very important fact, and you may have done so in other instances."

This wasn't the lovable, self-sacrificing, and wholly charming girl I had known of late, but the spiteful, hot-tempered little minx who had kicked the burst tire that day and bossed me around like a pair of old boots.

"I think," she added, "it would be a wise precaution to look up every item of those admirable credentials of yours. I might find something more than a predilection for alcohol."

"You might, madam," I said, turning and meeting her eyes for the first time. "I dare say there are many things in my character that aren't admirable, but one thing you won't find—the will to hurt another in an inferior position who can't hit back."

Now, that wasn't a lovely speech any more than hers, whatever truth there was in either, but it had been goaded out of me against my will. Looking back on it now, I believe we were both

suffering from "nerves" that day, she from the long strain of her uncle's illness and cranky humors; I from the total stoppage of John Barleycorn. Also, I was bothered about Frean. She was running with him a good bit, and seemed to fancy him, while, though I knew he wasn't fit to tie her shoes, I had to stand by and say nothing. Again, she had got into the habit lately of riding me with spurs when so minded, flaring up like this for no reason at all.

"How dare you!" she gasped. "How dare you use such words to me! What do you mean by it? You've got entirely above your position, and I see I was greatly mistaken in your character——"

"I'm very sorry, ma'am; I spoke quickly and without thought. I'm sure I ask your pardon and beg to withdraw the words."

"A slip of the tongue is no fault of the mind. Such words aren't so easily withdrawn, or forgiven, either, and only for my uncle, I would discharge you here and now! You deserve to be, if ever an insolent servant did! This comes of being kind to people, treating them with consideration, putting them above their position. Some natures are incapable of gratitude or—or anything!"

"I'm sure, ma'am, I've always appreciated, far more than I can say, your interest——"

"If you say that again I'll give you two weeks' wages and discharge you *now,* uncle or no uncle!

And, mind you, it will be without a character. I say I have *no* interest in you whatsoever!"

"Quite so, ma'am. What I meant, and was about to say, was your interest in the cause of total abstinence, thanks to which you gave me another chance."

"You weren't going to say anything of the kind! That's just more of your horrible deceit. I'm sorry I did give you another chance. I should have told Mr. Varney of your condition that night. It would have saved me this extremely lowering scene, a vulgar matter which I won't condescend to discuss further."

But she did, after an interval of frigid silence. Evidently the more she thought over it, the angrier she got. "Servants have, indeed, progressed, as my uncle remarked," she exclaimed. "Now they even presume to instruct their employers in deportment and ethics. But, then, they are such perfect and admirable characters themselves and we should be highly flattered that they deign to accept our wages at all.

"And so I am a brutal and tyrannical mistress, bullying my servants around because they can't answer back? Truly, that isn't the case with you, though no doubt your tongue would be more cautiously polite if I were a man and not a woman. Perhaps I even kick and beat my servants? That is a nice tale to go round the neighborhood! And

yet, with all my fiendish cruelty, the same people have served me for the past fifteen years. How do you account for that?"

"Surely, ma'am, you've punished me enough for a hasty and unfortunate remark."

Somehow I could say nothing right and this in itself was another unfortunate remark. "Don't add to your impertinence," she said.

But I did, and in the most heinous fashion; for it was at this moment that I kissed her. It is really remarkable how such things happen; one moment you are a fairly respectable citizen, in spite of your many faults, the next an unspeakable criminal, an enemy to society and young womanhood; in short, the abysmal brute. It is a species of madness, I suppose, for which there is no accounting, but I had been sorely tempted for many a day. She had ordered me to stop the car, the better to air her opinion of me. The road was deserted. I was really annoyed with her. Her scolding but provocative lips were very near my own, and—well, that's how it happened.

She struggled like a true heroine, and so I kissed her again. This time I took more care and deliberation.

"There," I said, "I may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb."

She made no reply, but sat bolt upright, frigid, immovable, as though her spine were an icicle.

She had gone from red to white like a semaphore, put the back of a hand to her ravaged lips and looked at me over it. I couldn't meet her eyes and found something intensely interesting on the dashboard to examine. The silence lengthened.

"Anyway," I said over a shoulder, "if I'm to be fired—well, it was worth it."

She said nothing, gave no sign that she had even heard. I felt those eyes boring into my back like red-hot needles. I began to perspire freely, to fidget, to look, no doubt, the miserable ass I felt. To ruin everything by a moment's folly! Our good understanding, the superlative opportunity of penetrating the mystery of the Black Company, Mr. Varney's high opinion of me, this quiet home——

When the silence had become unendurable she said very calmly and as though addressing a blot on the landscape, "And now, if you are quite ready, I should like to return home."

I gave the starter a vicious jab and, making too sharp a turn, almost succeeded in emptying us in a wayside ditch. But even this failed to arouse her from her frigid immobility; she never even blinked.

We indulged in a mile of ponderous silence; then I slowed down. "I'm awfully sorry," I began above the drone of the engine. "I don't know how it happened. I was mad, clean crazy."

She continued to say nothing.

"Of course it was inexcusable," I blundered on. "It was an accident; I didn't mean it. I was a fool, a cad. I—I hope you'll try to overlook it, ma'am; I wouldn't like to lose this job. But, of course, I've made it impossible——"

I gave it up; I might as well have been addressing the wind shield. One cannot be eloquent or impressive with such an audience.

The rest of the homeward journey was finished in record time and silence, and Miss Gelette entered the house without giving me so much as a glance.

Shortly afterward, when I was in the garage, I was informed by Horace that Mr. Varney wished to see me; and there was that in the old butler's face and manner that told me I was "in for it." Of course Miss Gelette, ignoring the cardinal rule of the house—that nothing must worry or disturb Mr. Varney—had told him of my conduct, and of course, I should be summarily dismissed. Well, I had brought it all on myself and there was no use trying to dodge the inevitable.

Miss Gelette was in the study with her uncle, and there was a visitor present, a man I had never seen before. He was a large, middle-aged individual, quiet, respectable, sober, and might have been anything from a detective to a floorwalker.

Varney, seated in his big armchair and leaning on the gold-knobbed Malacca cane, the inevitable

chess problem at his elbow, was evidently in one of his fine tempers.

"What's the meaning of this, Peter Henry?" he demanded as I entered. "Here's a fellow who claims to be Joyce, and who says you've stolen his name and job, after assaulting and almost murdering him. What's the meaning of it, hey?"

CHAPTER VIII

CONSPIRING CIRCUMSTANCES

I WOULD have liked very much to know the meaning of it myself, for, of all things, this was naturally the last I had expected. How could the grave give up its dead? How could this fellow be Joyce, when I knew Joyce to have been ground to pieces by a locomotive three weeks ago? And assuredly he wasn't the man who had eloped with my car.

There remained, then, the obvious answer that he, too, was an impostor. Either such an organization as the Black Company really existed, and, for all my fancied cleverness, they had discovered the deception and sent another member to take my place, or this fellow had discovered it somehow on his own hook, and meant to profit by it himself.

I would have liked very much also if Brenda Gelette had been somewhere else at the moment, for the uncompromising stare of her eyes, which I felt rather than saw, was singularly disconcerting. Certainly her inning had come, and, in her present mood, I knew she would make the most of it. For one who had presumed to moralize, I was in rather an unenviable position.

"If this man says I assaulted and robbed him," I replied to Varney, "he's saying what isn't so. I never saw him in my life before."

I could see that Varney was more than willing to believe me—and the knowledge hurt. "What have you to say to that?" he demanded triumphantly of the other. "Come, repeat your story, word for word. And mind, if I catch you lying, my man, it will be a very serious business for you. I'll have you jailed for fraud and false pretenses as sure as I sit here! So think twice before you speak."

"I've nothing to fear, sir," said the other respectfully, but with the manner of one strong in the truth. "I repeat, sir, that I'm Henry Joyce, Mr. Fremstad's old chauffeur, and I can prove everything I say. On the night of June sixteenth, a couple of days before I was to report here, I was sandbagged and robbed in Philadelphia. I was out of my head for over a week in the hospital. My papers and clothes were gone, and, when I got out yesterday, I had to get a new outfit. Then I came on here, never thinking to find some one working under my name. If you call up Mr. Fremstad, sir, on the long distance, he'll tell you I've been in the hospital for the last three weeks, for I saw him yesterday. He'll tell you this fellow ain't me. Just ask him, sir, what Henry Joyce looks like——"

"Pardon me, but there's really no need," I put in. "I admit that my name isn't Joyce, and that I'm an impostor."

A little gasp came from the window where Brenda was standing, while Varney looked as if about to choke. At that moment I realized in what affection I held the old fellow, in spite of his temper and humors.

Our nightly battles over the chessboard had drawn us closer together than I had ever suspected. For all his bitter tongue and manner, I saw he had formed a regard for me far beyond my deserts; I caught a look of pain and distress in his sunken eyes, the sort that can only be caused by an esteemed one found unworthy.

In a moment it was gone, and he rasped out: "So you're an impostor, hey? You're not Joyce? Then who the devil are you?"

"Why, a nobody, sir," I replied, seeing nothing to be gained by giving my real name, considering his poor opinion of my family. I decided, too, it would be wisest if Joyce knew as little about me as possible. I realized now the advantages of wealth, for I meant to spare no expense in investigating the Black Company. Better let Joyce and Corby think me a poor adventurer rather than one who could hire an army of detectives, if need be, and use all the influence that great wealth commands.

"You mean to say, then, that you're a criminal?"

pursued Varney. "That you robbed and assaulted this man——"

"No, sir. I was in New York on June sixteenth, and I can prove it. I repeat I never saw this man before, and I dare him to swear to my identity in a police court."

"No, I wouldn't take my oath on it," said Joyce, who, perhaps, had no wish to bring the police into the matter. "It was dark, and I didn't have a good look at the fellow who slugged me. But the point is, you've got my papers, you took my name and job; so it looks a bit as if you was the fellow, don't it?"

"I should say it does!" exclaimed Varney, eying me grimly. "Come, you had better be more explicit. What is your name, and how did you get into this mess, if you claim to be innocent?"

I told him I preferred not to mention my real name. "Call me Peter Smith, sir," I said, "for I don't want my folks to hear of this trouble. I was simply down on my luck and anxious to find a job. I came from New York on June seventeenth, and I was assaulted and robbed just as Mr. Joyce says he was. My clothes were taken, too, and in the ones left me I found that letter from Mr. Fremstad."

Old Varney listened to my story with open skepticism, at no pains to hide his disbelief, while Joyce smiled behind a large hand. I could hardly

blame any one for not crediting it, but I received help from the most unexpected quarter, Brenda Gelette saying quietly: "Peter told me about his assault and robbery the day he came here."

Noble soul! How forgiving, how generous is woman! It was evident that she had not told Mr. Varney of my recent unpardonable conduct. Perhaps there had been no opportunity; or perhaps, knowing how necessary I was to him, she had decided to sacrifice her own feelings and say nothing. At all events, here she was coming to my rescue, heaping coals of fire on my most unworthy head.

"He said, uncle," she continued, "that he spent the night with a farmer called Taylor, near Sea Bright station, and I know this to be a fact."

So her curiosity as to my past had not been confined merely to questioning me. It was fortunate I had told the truth about Taylor, one of those happy accidents that happen to me infrequently.

"It was Taylor's finding that letter from Mr. Fremstad and calling me Joyce that put the idea into my head," I hastened to explain. "I knew a lot about automobiles, and when I happened on Miss Gelette, stuck with that blow-out——"

"Yes, that is quite true," she interrupted again. "It was I, uncle, who said he was Joyce; he never claimed to be. You see that letter——" And she explained how it had fallen out of my pocket.

"Thank you, kindly, ma'am," I said as she finished. "There was no excuse for my deceiving you and Mr. Varney, ma'am, but—but I wanted the job very much——"

"Were you out of work?" asked Mr. Varney.

"Yes, sir; for six months," I answered quite truthfully.

"How did you lose your last place?" he demanded.

"Through no fault of my own, sir," I replied, pleased at being still able to speak the truth. "I've been out of a job for all of six months and when I saw this chance—well, things sort of played into my hands, sir. I didn't deliberately plan it. I'm unfortunate, but I'm not a crook, and if Mr. Joyce still thinks I had a hand in his robbery, he has only to make a charge to the police, and I'll prove I was in New York that night."

"No, I wouldn't swear to nothing I wasn't dead sure of," said Joyce virtuously, his little, countersunk eyes still very busy with me. "An oath on the Book is a very serious thing. Besides, I know what hunting a job means, being hard up and desp'rate, and so, as far as I'm concerned, this won't be a police case. I've got my health back, and my job, and that's all I'm looking for."

"That's very decent of you, my man," said Varney, "and I promise you won't lose by it. Peter Smith, or whatever your name is," fixing his eyes grimly on me, "I suppose I would be doing my

duty to society by jailing you for obtaining money under false pretenses. However, I have to bear in mind that you earned the money, that you served me honestly and efficiently, even though you secured the position by fraud. It seems a rather remarkable coincidence that both Joyce and you should have been assaulted and robbed by the same person, yet I believe your story. It shows you aren't used to the ways of deception, else you would have known very well that Joyce was bound to turn up and expose you. I choose to believe that misfortune and your necessity made you reckless of consequences. You've had your lesson, and I know you will profit by it. I will see what can be done in the way of getting you a situation, perhaps more suitable to your abilities—I may say I've had the matter under consideration for some time—and meanwhile you may remain here. I warrant you will find plenty to do."

I was in the middle of a speech of gratitude when there came a knock at the door, and the butler announced: "Mr. Frean, sir." And Frean followed the words in person.

"Oh, sorry," he said. "Didn't know you'd company——" And then his eyes fell on me.

It was the first time he had seen me at close quarters without my smoked glasses, and now I was standing in the full glare of the windows.

"Good Lord!" he breathed, starting back as if he had seen a spook. "It can't be—it *is* Pete Lawton!"

"Eh, what's that?" cried Varney, bouncing in his chair, while a stifled exclamation came from Brenda Gelette. "What's wrong with you, man!"

"It's—it's he!" cried Frean, pointing a trembling finger at me. "It's Pete Lawton without his mustache—the fellow who was supposed to have been killed by a train three weeks ago!"

They were all leaning forward, staring at me, and I noted a peculiar gleam of interest in the deep-set eyes of Joyce. My plan of keeping him ignorant of my identity was thus ruined just when it promised the greatest success, for I saw that further dodging was useless. Frean knew me, and if I attempted to deny my identity, he would set about proving it. He bore me no love, and would do it for spite, if nothing else.

I had expected that the mention of my true identity would produce some unfavorable emotion in Varney, but I had no idea of its depth and extent. His face had slowly assumed an awful reddish-black hue, and the veins on his forehead stood out like seams of blood until I thought he was going to have a stroke. Then he paled to the sickly color of old gold, and he sat trembling as if with the ague, his congested eyes positively glaring at me.

"So you're Peter Lawton, hey?" he croaked at length. "You weren't killed, after all?"

"I'm afraid I must admit the truth of that," I replied. "The story I told you was substantially true. The man who assaulted me stole my car, and was killed in my place."

Miss Gelette spoke for the third time, but now there was scarcely concealed anger, contempt, and animosity in her voice. "Uncle, Mr. Lawton was the person we nearly ran over that night, and whom you advised to enter the alcoholic ward of the nearest hospital."

Now I ask you, in all seriousness, is there any comprehending women? You remember the old darky preacher and how he kept insisting in his sermon that there was precious little difference between man and woman, until an aged Don Juan in the congregation was goaded into arising and declaiming "Well, brudder, let us thank de Lawd for dat little diff'rence!" But I must say I agreed with the preacher; I mean it has always seemed to me that a great deal of bunk has been written about the mystery of woman, her mental processes and psychology, and that in reality they are little, if at all, different from those of a man. Understand man and you understand woman. And yet I could conceive no man acting as did Miss Gelette, executing such an outrageous right-about-face. One moment she was my friend, the next my bitter

enemy; one moment helping me nobly, the next seeking to complete my downfall. She had condoned, if not forgiven, my conduct toward her, and now simply because it transpired that I wasn't a professional chauffeur—— No, I couldn't understand it; it was most mysterious, astounding, and sad. She looked at me as though I were some pariah.

"Eh?" said old Varney, in answer to her last pleasant remark. "You mean he was that besotted fool, and you've known it all along?"

"Yes," she said, "I have. I agreed to say nothing to you because I never imagined it to be his *usual* condition. He gave me to understand it was in the nature of an accident. I wanted to give him another chance; I thought him worthy of it, and, of course, I had no idea he wasn't Joyce, no idea of his real identity. I didn't know he was telling untruths; I didn't think *anybody* could lie so plausibly. I see now how foolish I was, how utterly mistaken I was in—in his real character."

Varney turned to me, his yellow face working. He spoke with the utmost difficulty, a sort of venomous croak. "A fine little joke, eh, Mr. Lawton?" rubbing his claws. "As I believe you possess an odd million dollars or so, I suppose I owe your inestimable services to a drunken debauch and your refined sense of humor? As a spy in my household, you've been having a little fun with me,

hey? Quite in the exquisite and refined spirit of your famous family! You come to spy out and gloat over my infirmities, insinuate yourself into my confidence——"

"Nothing of the kind, sir!" I broke in, finding speech at last. "I never knew you were even acquainted with my family. I never heard your name mentioned, never knew you existed. I knew nothing about you——"

"Liar!" he shouted. "You're incapable of speaking the truth! Like father, like son. You've done nothing but tell lies since you came here. Get out of my house and never let me set eyes on you again! Go!"

"Mr. Varney," I said, "you must listen to me. If you will only have patience and hear me out——"

"If I only had strength I'd throw you out!" he cried, brandishing his cane. "Arnold, show this fellow out!"

Frean came forward obediently, but with no great heart, for he evidently remembered the fracas in my rooms following the dummy-bridge incident. "You'd better go, Lawton," he said, making no effort to hide his smug satisfaction. "You don't want the police in, do you?"

I wasn't caring either for him or the police, but I saw it was utterly impossible for me to say anything further to Varney. He had worked himself into such a frenzy that I feared he would

do himself harm. The longer I stayed the worse it got, the mere sight of me being apparently enough, and so, without another word, I left the room and house.

When I was in the garage, exchanging Jules' borrowed plumage for the cheap serge suit left me by my unknown assailant, Joyce sauntered in with an air of one taking possession.

"Well, sir," he said respectfully enough, "you've had your joke, but blamed if I can see where it comes in. Catch me working for three weeks as a chauffeur if I had all your dough! May I ask why you done it, sir? You couldn't have been drunk all the time—meaning no offense, I'm sure."

"I could have been drunk all the time, only I wasn't," I said. "The whole matter is very simple. It was the result of a silly wager, and, if you know anything about me at all, you'll know that silly wagers are my strong point. I bet a fellow I could earn my keep, and that letter of yours from Mr. Hampsted showed me the way to get a job."

He did not correct my conscious and deliberate mistake about the name Fremstad. "Well, sir, a bet's a bet, and I've known funnier ones than that. It's queer how you and me come to be robbed by the same fellow, me in Philly one night, and you in Sea Bright the night after, for the same fellow must have pulled it off. Else, how would you have found that letter? And, of course, I see now you

couldn't have done it, for millionaires don't go round robbing poor chauffeurs. Well, you've won your bet, sir, and I'm sure you're glad it's over. You must have found it pretty slow here, with the season only half started."

"Yes, slow enough. But, by the way, I had one funny experience. There's a fellow here by the name of Corby—he's Mr. Frean's chauffeur—and as you may meet him, Joyce, I may as well warn you that he's a bit cracked. Yes, a harmless sort of bug. There's a game called chess—ever play it? No, I don't suppose you do. Well, this fellow Corby must have gone kind of nutty over it, for he calls himself the King's Bishop's pawn. It's a fact. And once he called me the King's pawn. I met him a couple of times, and he drinks buttermilk to the health of the Black Company."

The man joined very heartily in my laugh. "Buttermilk! That's hardly in your line, sir, is it? And what's the Black Company?"

"Search me. Some crazy idea of his own. Maybe he means the black chessmen. I humored him, pretending to know all about it, just to see what else he'd say. Funny bug, but then they say we're all a bit cracked on some subject. Well, I've warned you, so don't be surprised if he starts calling *you* the King's pawn and talks a lot of piffle. I guess you won't find it so slow with him here to josh."

"Maybe not, sir; though joshing lunatics ain't

quite in my line. I'd rather have something healthier. If this fellow what's-his-name was to find out you'd been pulling his leg—well, he might take it to heart, and there's no telling how such bugs'll act. He hadn't ought to be let tool a car if he's as crazy as all that."

"Very likely he isn't crazy," I said. "Perhaps he was only joshing me, pulling *my* leg. Anyway, I've given you the tip for what it may be worth. Crazy or not, he's a funny character."

"I should say so, sir. It's a bum idea, sir, however you take it—calling himself a chessman belonging to the Black Company. Maybe it's a thriller he seen at the movies. Anyway, sir, I'm sure you're glad to be quit of it all and to get back home. There's no place like home, sir, and you'll be having a warm welcome."

There was a look in his eyes I couldn't quite fathom and which he made no attempt to hide.

"That was some joy ride you had down here, sir," he added. "It must have been. And to think of you taking my name and job all on account of a bet! Well, well, we do make fool wagers, don't we? It'll be a great surprise to everybody, sir, when they hear it was the other fellow who was killed instead of you. And what a welcome home you'll get! I envy you, sir; I do indeed."

I said farewell to Joyce and left the garage with the feeling that he was the owner of some

unpleasant joke which he believed I shared. It had nothing to do with the Black Company, his suspicions of me—if he had any—or mine of him. No, it was something altogether apart from that. What was it? I hadn't the least idea, but that it existed I felt certain. Could it be that, in spite of Frean's identification and my acknowledgment, Joyce did not believe I was Peter Lawton? That seemed hardly reasonable, yet I had no other explanation to offer. It was a puzzle.

CHAPTER IX

I FIND MYSELF A MURDERER

I HAD no intention of leaving without having, by some means or other, a word with Brenda Gelette. No doubt she would refuse to see me, but, whether she wanted to or not, I would see her. I could not leave without attempting to correct the belief that I had known Mr. Varney's identity from the start. Why should I plan to enter his house as a spy, why gloat over his infirmities? Why did he hate me and mine so ferociously? Perhaps Brenda Gelette would condescend to answer these questions.

After all, what had I done to be treated with such anger and contempt? At worst I was guilty of a poor sort of joke. No doubt, too, they believed the popular press opinion of me. Well, I couldn't correct that, and perhaps it wasn't such an erroneous opinion after all. "To see ourselves as others see us!" I had sown a fine crop of wild oats in a remarkably short time and I must abide by the harvest. Nor dare I tell her anything about the Black Company, the extra inducement which had made me continue to play the part of Joyce. But I could apologize for what

I had done, perhaps make her see that it wasn't quite the ill-mannered piece of levity it seemed. If I could convince her that my career as a prodigal was a matter of six months only, that I had turned over a new leaf and meant to keep the pages clean, that it was a life-and-death struggle with the Demon and that she had helped me profoundly, my regeneration dating from the day I had first met her—yes, if I could convince her of all that——

I went up on the veranda to ring the bell and ran into Frean who had just come out of the house. "The very man I wanted to see," I said, and beckoned him to a quiet corner.

He came unwillingly, watching me warily. "You needn't blame me for any of this," he said defensively. "I'd no idea you were still living or that you weren't Joyce. Of all your fool escapades, Lawton, this is about your worst. You've got yourself into a nice mess, but it's entirely your own fault."

"Have I said it wasn't?"

"Well, if you take my advice you'll beat it while the going's good instead of hanging round here. Mr. Varney may change his mind and have you jailed for false pretenses. He can do it, you know."

"I suppose he can. But never mind about that; I'll run the risk. I want you to tell Miss Gelette

that I wish to see her; a servant wouldn't take the message, but you can."

"She won't see you, Lawton."

"She will if you ask her. I must see her before I go. You can get her to come down here. Go ahead."

"I'll do nothing of the kind. Why should she see you? I tell you it's no use; she knows all about it."

"All about what?"

"Oh, you know what I mean. What's the use? There's nothing for it, Lawton, but to go back and face the music, the sooner the better. You've only made it worse by this delay."

"What music? What the Harry are you talking about?"

He laughed unpleasantly. "This possum game's played out, Lawton. I assure you it is. You knew very well what I mean—that double charge of manslaughter. Manslaughter? It's really murder!"

"Look here, my boy," I said, "this isn't my day for laughing at jokes. What are you getting at? Give us the works."

"Oh, cut it, Lawton," he sneered. "You can't play the innocent on me, you know. Why, everybody knows it! Varney and Miss Gelette know now the real reason why you were anxious to change your name, why you've been in hiding these weeks. You thought it better to play dead till it

blew over, eh? A pretty cute idea, but your little game's gone up prematurely in smoke. You've got to answer for those two killings, and all your money won't save you this time."

I shot out a hand and got him by the collar. "Now spring the rest of this joke, Frean. Open up, or I'll open you!"

"None of your beastly violence, Lawton!"

"You'll find it pretty beastly, my boy, if you don't come clean. I'll darned well spoil your pretty looks. Come, now!"

"All right," he choked with a white sneer. "If you prefer to play the innocent—though don't think you're fooling anybody—I'm referring to what was in the newspapers and what everybody knows. You're like an ostrich with its head in the sand. Everybody knows you ran over a woman and a child the night you were supposed to be killed. You murdered them, never gave them a chance, though they call it manslaughter. But, of course, you didn't know about it."

I am sure he was amply repaid by the effect of this horrible news on me; I must have shown something of what I felt. Suddenly I understood Joyce's queer manner and his remark about my receiving a warm welcome home. I felt physically ill, stunned, aghast. That mad ride and the fears it had conjured up at the time had faded into the limbo of forgotten things. It is so easy to forget

our lucky escapes, our just punishments! And, poor fool, all the time I had been congratulating myself on having escaped; I had believed that a special Providence watches over the drunk. A woman and a child killed—yes, murdered!

"I give you my word, Frean, I knew nothing about it," I managed to say at length. "You must be trying to kid me. You are, aren't you? I saw the account in the papers of that crazy ride of mine, but nothing was said——"

"It was in the next morning's paper. You couldn't have failed to see it."

"I didn't see the next morning's paper."

He shrugged and smiled as he arranged his disordered collar. "No? Well, there are some things we don't care to see. I'm sure I believe you, Lawton, but there are millions who wouldn't."

"You needn't jeer; I'm telling you the truth. Anyway, how do they know I'm responsible? What if they did identify the car and license? Wasn't the car stolen from me?"

"So you say."

"D-do you mean—why, hang it! There's the fellow they found in it! You can't get away from that."

"I'm not trying to. Of course, if it wasn't you, somebody else must have been driving."

"Well, then, if this other fellow was driving——"

"There's no use trying to fool yourself, Lawton,

and certainly you're not fooling me. The woman and child were killed in Red Bank, on the route you took from Princeton to Sea Bright, while the man you induced to take your car was killed at Camden. He had no reason to be near Red Bank."

"Induced to take my car! What do you mean, Frean?"

"Paid, then, if that's the word. None of your beastly violence, Lawton!"

"Are you insinuating that I knew about killing this poor woman and child, and that I paid some fellow to impersonate me while I lay hid under an assumed name, afraid to face the consequences? Is that what you mean, eh?"

He backed away. "None of your violence now, Lawton. You asked me to tell you and I have. If any other construction can be placed on your incomprehensible actions during the past weeks, I'm sure your friends will be only too glad to hear of it. You asked for an honest opinion, and I've given it. It's the opinion of Mr. Varney, Miss Gelette, everybody—as you'll soon find out."

"There's more than that I want to find out," I said, choking down my anger. "Let us put aside my affairs, bad as they are, and come to your own. What's your game down here, Frean?"

I had no intention of mentioning the Black Company, aware he would only deny all knowledge of it, and then inform Corby of my lively interest.

All my talk with Joyce had been toward the idea that I regarded the whole thing as a joke, and I had no intention of now exposing my hand. Of course, Frean had no idea I knew anything about the mysterious secret society, yet my question brought a startled look to his eyes, gone in a moment.

"My game! What do you mean? I've known this family for years—not as a servant, but as a friend——"

"Don't bother to sneer at me. I want to know why, as a friend, you lied so outrageously to Mr. Varney. Your pretenses here are as false as my own, if it comes to that. Perhaps you don't know I heard the real reason why you had to leave your father's house and business?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," he said, though he plainly was. "I'm sure you'd go snooping into my private affairs just to see what trouble you could make. You blame me because you're a hopeless drunkard."

"You're quite wrong. I'm not a drunkard, hopeless or otherwise; and though I've a pretty good idea why you induced me to take that first drink, I haven't any grudge against you. Not a bit, Frean. Your private affairs are nothing to me except this—that I've a natural objection to seeing you hanging round any decent girl. Is that plain enough? We needn't mention any names, but what I'm getting

at is this: If you're going to do any courting, it's got to be on the level; otherwise I'll make it my business to see that the girl knows just how you stand with decent society."

"Decent society!" he laughed, though his eyes were venomous. "That's a good phrase, coming from you. Perhaps, Apostle Peter, you'll go in and tell Mr. Varney and Miss Gelette all the dreadful things you know about me? Of course, they'll be quite ready to believe you, for you've set up such a remarkable reputation for telling the truth. Oh, yes, they'll take your mere word for it; they'll know it's pure altruism on your part. I assure you it will pay you better to make it your business to attend to your own and not mine. You'll have to work off your spite against me in some other way."

"I tell you again, Frean, that I've no spite against you; not an atom. I don't care a hang how you've acted, or may act, toward me. I'm well able to look after myself, but I intend to see that you act decently where Miss Gelette is concerned."

"You're a nice censor of morals, Lawton, I must say. Even if you got a hearing—which you won't—I could easily disprove whatever garbled version you may have heard about my difference with my father. Anyway, you're a bit late on the wire, for that difference was made up before I came down here."

"So you say."

"It's the truth, though it's nothing to me whether you believe it or not, and Mr. Varney knows all about it. Finally, if Miss Gelette wants any outsider to manage her affairs, she'll hardly select a person of your stamp. No, you can't harm me, Lawton, and the best thing you can do is to mind your own sorry business and give yourself up to the law before they send detectives after you." And, as if to show his contempt of my warning by leaving me in undisputed possession of the field, he jumped into his car and drove off.

I now realized the utter hopelessness of trying to see Brenda Gelette or saying anything further in my own defense. Added to all my other sins, Mr. Varney and she now believed I had been hiding like a coward all this time, with those two deaths upon my conscience. Indeed, circumstances had so conspired against me that I really couldn't blame anybody for thinking so, nor could all my excuses and explanations wipe out the fact that I was guilty of those two deaths. There was no use hanging about the house any longer, for they would refuse to see me under any circumstances, and so I left the veranda.

Near the foot of the steps my eyes fell upon a piece of crumpled paper lying under a rosebush, as if deposited there by some idle wind. Little things had begun to interest me vastly of late, and so I picked it up. Typed upon it was a fragment

of another chess game, opening with the Petroff defense, and, decoding it, I read: "Varney moves on second."

Pocketing it, I passed out of the gate, wondering what it meant, and believing that Frean had inadvertently dropped it. Halfway up the block I turned instinctively, and, screened by a neighboring privet hedge, took a farewell look at the house where I had spent such an eventful three weeks, and which, for all my disgrace, drew me like home. As I looked I saw Joyce come out of the garage and go hunting about the veranda, as if searching for a thousand-dollar bill. It would seem that the paper in my pocket belonged to him, evidently a message from the Black King.

Varney moves on second. Second what? Did it mean a certain square on the strange chessboard? But there are sixteen second squares, White and Black having eight each. Which one was it?

CHAPTER X

I DO SOME INVESTIGATING

HALF an hour later I was on my way to Philadelphia, not New York; not to "face the music," but to begin investigations concerning this mysterious organization styling itself the Black Company. I wasn't trying to put off facing the music, nor had I any intention of shirking it; the tune itself meant nothing to me, but the death of that poor woman and child weighed heavily on my soul. I was a murderer—a double murderer—and I had flattered myself on getting off so easily! I had killed an innocent woman and child. It was no use pleading I had not done so intentionally, that I had no remembrance of it, that I wasn't responsible for my actions. I *was* responsible. I was a man grown, and my own master. No one had asked me to get drunk that night, much less compelled me. I had elected to do so, and I must take the consequences.

I saw myself as Miss Gelette must see me, at best a drunken fool with no respect for human life; at worst a callous coward to boot. It was not a lovely picture, and yet some good can come from the worst evil, and in truth our dead selves may

be stepping-stones to higher things, for this horrible news I had heard heralded my final conquest of the Demon. I was effectually sobered for all time, as well I might be. Henceforth, I could never look into the flowing bowl without seeing mirrored therein a murdered woman and child.

No, I was not running away from merited punishment. Indeed, the worst punishment I could suffer was what I took with me and could not escape—memory and conscience. Three weeks had passed since that terrible night, and a few days more or less would make little difference to waiting justice, while it might mean everything as regards my solving the riddle of the Black Company. Once I made my identity known in New York I could say good-by to personal freedom; even though I were allowed out on bail, my movements would be severely restricted, and it might well be that I should receive a stiff jail sentence. Accidents from joy riding had been alarmingly frequent and the courts had threatened to make a summary example; well, they could find no more fitting example than myself and, as Frean had said, all my money couldn't save me. I was just the type that the courts were after.

And so, while I still had the opportunity, I determined to learn something of the Black Company at firsthand, the only satisfactory way. For who would believe that such an organization existed, that it wasn't the figment of an alcoholic imagination?

Let Frean, when I didn't turn up, set the police after me; let it be thought I was still trying to hide. I didn't care; the public's opinion of me could hardly be worse than it was. In all likelihood this man, Augustus Fremstad, was the Black King and through him I could learn much. Joyce had come straight from him, and it might be taken for granted that the "accident" which induced Mr. Fremstad to give up motoring was purely imaginary and designed simply as an excuse to pass Joyce on to Varney.

Augustus Fremstad; obviously a German or hyphenated American. Was he a secret agent of the Central Powers and was I about to unearth a plot of the kind that was coming to light day after day? A plot to cripple the help that America was giving the Allies, or frustrate her coming participation in the war which most of us saw to be inevitable?

In view of what was happening all over the country, this seemed the most logical answer. And yet where did Theodore Varney fit in? His personality had impressed itself strongly on me. I liked and admired the old tyrant, and I could not believe he had the remotest connection with such a conspiracy. How often and eloquntly, during our nightly games of chess, had he spoken of the tragedy of Belgium and how, for reasons of self-preservation, if none other, we should be in the field with France.

Reason and inclination approved the theory that, rather than being associated with this secret society, he was a prospectice victim. But in what way? He was not even a wealthy man, as wealth goes—or so I had been given to understand; he had never mixed in politics, never figured prominently in anything but unobtrusive good works. And yet what did I actually know about him? No more than the servants and Miss Gelette had told me. Sea Bright wasn't his home; he had no background there, and my opinion was based simply on hearsay and the little I had seen of him.

Could it be possible, as I had thought initially, that there was a reverse side to the touching picture of the heroic and kind-hearted old invalid? Had he really Addison's disease or, for reasons of his own, faked the symptoms? Had that cryptic message "Varney moves on second" emanated from him, a message, say, to the Black King, dropped by Frean or even Joyce? It behooves me to take nothing for granted, to not let favorable prejudice blind me to possibilities. I must investigate Theodore Varney, look into his past in his home town. And I must visit the Charity Hospital and prove what I suspected—that Joyce never had been there.

I reached Philadelphia by what an Irishman I know would call a "circuituitous" route, for though I believed I had fooled Joyce completely, I was taking no chances. Frean, of course, had no idea

I knew anything about the Black Company, and even Corby, when he learned my true identity, would believe with Joyce that I had been merely trying to dodge the double charge of manslaughter and thus had every reason to assume the rôle I had. At the same time, just in case Joyce had some suspicions and communicated them to Frean or Corby, I made every pretense of leaving for New York, then doubled back at Red Bank and so went on to Camden. I was careful to see if I were followed, laying several clever traps, but there was no sign of Corby, Frean or Joyce.

It was evening when I reached the Quaker City with which I am fairly familiar; indeed, I know it better than most New Yorkers, for there was a time when it was my temporary home. That was some ten years ago when I was working my way through college and, in summer, held down a job with Cable & Co., the big engineering firm, whose head offices are in New York. It wasn't much of a post, but it helped me to pay my way, was obligingly waiting for me when the college year closed, and it led ultimately, on my graduation, to a good position in the New York office. Those were the days when I had ambition and a lean purse, the best companions for a hard road. Truly the real test comes with riches, not poverty.

My plans, such as they were, were simple; I would secure a humble lodging and pose as a chauffeur

looking for work. I had almost seventy-five dollars with me, my wages from Varney—I meant to return the money in due course—and this was enough to see me through; for, of course, though my check was good for hundreds of thousands I daren't raise a penny on my true name. I should take the name of Smith, John Smith of Boston. Frean had not recognized me when I wore the smoked glasses but, in my present rôle, these would be too conspicuous, attracting the notice I wished to avoid, and a pair of ordinary ones would serve better. It was highly improbable that I should meet any one who knew me; it was years since I'd been in the town for any length of time, and at that period my acquaintances were in a far different class than my present ones. Howard Roupell, I believed, hailed originally from Philadelphia, and, of course, there were others, but I should steer clear of their luxurious haunts.

Having bought a pair of genuine brass-rimmed spectacles from a quack oculist who assured me I had astigmatism, and who charged me only five dollars because I reminded him of a long lost brother, I went straight to the hospital in question.

"I'm looking for an old pal of mine, Henry Joyce," I explained to an official behind a railed partition in the entrance hall. "He's a chauffeur, like me, and I heard tell when I was in Boston——"

"Joyce, you say?"

"Yes, sir. I heard he'd been in a smash-up and brought here. Smith's my name. I come on here——"

"Your friend has left."

"What!" The fact that the man actually had been there was so unexpected, so contrary to my theory, that I could only gape.

"He was discharged yesterday," said the official, still consulting a large book. "It wasn't a motor accident but assault." And he turned me over to a white-capped nurse who appeared, saying she could give me a history of the case.

Well, this nurse—I think she was in charge of the accident ward—very obligingly proceeded to tell me exactly what I had heard from Joyce himself; it was entire corroboration of his story, down to the hour and night of his admission to the hospital. The ambulance had brought him in, suffering from what was thought at first to be a compound fracture of the skull; he had been sandbagged and robbed out Moyamensing way in a lonely street.

"I believe he has gone to New Jersey—I forget the place," concluded the nurse. "He said he had a new situation there. But, no doubt, you know the address."

"Well, I can't say I really know much about him, ma'am," I confessed, feeling that, for an old pal, I was displaying rather surprising ignorance. "You know how it is when you get out of touch

with a fellow, ma'am, him and me working in different cities. I just heard in a roundabout way, through another friend, of him being laid up here, and I took it for granted it was a smash-up, that being in our line. Did the police get the fellow who banged him up?"

"Not to my knowledge. I understand that on that same night a prisoner escaped from Moyamensing and that the police think he may have been responsible, but I've heard nothing further."

So that was that, and I left the hospital feeling something of a fool.

This feeling increased by leaps and bounds during the next two days, at the end of which period I was ready to believe that Corby had really been having a joke with me, that the Black Company had no existence but in his fertile imagination. Perhaps it was the sort of thing produced by buttermilk, for not only did I find Theodore Varney's character to be above reproach, agreeing with all I had heard of it, but also that of Augustus Fremstad. Thus another of my theories went west in no uncertain fashion. Rather than Mr. Fremstad proving to be a German or hyphenated American, he came of an old Dutch family who had been in Philadelphia since the time of Penn, a man of the most blameless and upright character it was possible to conceive. Moreover, he *had* given up motoring through an accident in which both he and Joyce

had had a very narrow escape, the brakes of their car suddenly failing to act.

I need not weary you with the details of how I conducted my investigation, but that I was able to do so thoroughly and quickly was due in no small measure to a man whom I had known by sight—as did most people in Philadelphia—when I worked with Cable & Co. This man was "Big Tim" Scallon, in those days a political czar of sorts and, if report went for anything, no better than the general type. In appearance he resembled Nast's worst caricature of "Boss" Tweed, a big bruiser of a man with the inevitable cigar and diamonds. But I had a certain admiration for him in those days. They were corrupt days in Philly—they may be so yet, for all I know—and I thought Scallon got blamed for things he never did, for the faults of the "system" rather than individual ones.

At all events he faded from the public eye, how or when I didn't know; for I'm not much on politics and have all I can do to understand something of the New York game without going elsewhere. At any rate I'd heard nothing of Scallon for years, and had forgotten all about him until, toward evening of the second day of my visit, I saw him in Market Street, as large as life and seemingly as prosperous as ever. I don't know how they manage it, but I've never yet seen an eclipsed politician who didn't manage to look like real money,

even if he'd reached the bottom of the old sock at home.

Now this investigation business isn't so easy as it sounds; I used to think that these private agencies were the softest way of making money, but they're not—not if they're on the level like, say, the famous Blunt Agency. It sounds easy in books but it isn't, and I didn't take long to find that out. You have to wade through tons of chaff before reaching any wheat.

To begin with, I had to disentangle the Augustus Fremstad I wanted from half a dozen others before starting to get a line on him. I was pretty well fed up with the job, and when I spied Tim Scallon, I realized he could do more for me in five minutes than I could for myself in five days. I knew that his career had been as varied as a bottle of the fifty-seven varieties, that he had been born and bred in Philly and knew everybody in town, high and low, like the palm of his own hand. And he would part with his information on very little provocation, that being part of his stock in trade, you might say. Of course, he didn't know me, and I wouldn't proclaim my true identity, but the very fact of his owning such a huge and mottled acquaintance made imposition all the easier. He would even pretend to remember having met me if I insisted on the point. It was his job to remember all the voters and their progeny, the name of the

first-born and what grandma died of, interesting and memorable stuff like that.

So I stepped out as his huge waddling figure heaved abreast of me and introduced myself as the friend of one Harrigan, whom I knew definitely as a former crony of his who had settled in New York some ten years ago. He shifted his cigar to port and received me with the genial smile I had always liked; a good-hearted fellow for all his unlovely looks. But his eyes were shrewd and cautious as he added, "Well, Mr. Smith, what can I do for you?"

I told him nothing much; merely that I was employed in a private investigation bureau in New York, that a client wanted inside dope on Theodore Varney and Augustus Fremstad, and that Harrigan had advised me to see him, Scallon.

"It's fortunate we met," I said, "for I was going to look you up. I've got a letter of introduction to you." And I began an imaginary search of my pocket. "It's here somewhere; I hope I haven't misplaced it——"

Scallon interrupted, acting precisely as I had judged he would. "That's all right," he said, waving a pulpy hand. "Never mind. Sure, I know Fremstad and Varney, though we never were what you might call bosoms. They're out of the top drawer, y'know—swell folk, not in my alley at all. Anybody could tell you about 'em, and you're

welcome to what I know, which is plenty. If this client of your firm is figgerin' on diggin' up something nasty about 'em, he's wasting his money and your time, see? Why, there ain't a more harmless coupla old cooties in Philly! I bet they was born with a crown an' harp."

Thus Scallon corroborated not only what I had already learned by my own endeavors, but told me a good deal more, even affirming that it was generally known old Varney had some disease that made him "yeller as a yeller dorg" and, because of that, was living the life of a recluse.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him if he had ever heard of such an organization as the Black Company, but I refrained. Not that I didn't trust Scallon, for the man confirmed, on this meeting, the opinion I had always held of him. Gross, no doubt, but honest according to his lights; kind-hearted to a fault, and loyal to his friends and the friends of friends; above petty malice or spite. A lot of good in these old-time, two-fisted politicians, let people talk as they may. They had their virtues. It went against the grain to impose on him even in so small a matter. Nor did I doubt his local knowledge. If such a society existed, he, of all men, would have heard some rumor of it. No, it wasn't that; it was simply that, standing there in Market Street talking with so sane and normal a being as Big Tim, and mindful also of the past

days' failures, the whole matter of the Black Company seemed an absurd fantasy. Scallon would laugh at me; how he would laugh! And perhaps, in any case it would be just as well if I said nothing. He would pass it on as a joke to some one, and if there *should* happen to be any truth in it——

But was there? What had I to go on? Nothing more than what Corby had told me, a man who might be half insane or who had a sense of humor even more eccentric than my own. Those two messages in the ingenious chess code might have come from Corby himself as part and parcel of the joke. Out of what flimsy material had I constructed this melodramatic play of the Black Company!

"A play that refuses to play. A play in which nobody acts but myself—and I'm the clown," I thought as, saying farewell to Scallon, I walked through the darkening streets to my humble lodgings near the river. "I'd better be getting back to New York; I'm only wasting my time here. There's nothing in it, and anyway, what business is it of mine? No, I've nothing to do——"

But I had, right at that place and moment. Indeed there was rather too much to do; for there were three of them, waiting for me obligingly in the dark alley near my lodgings. I walked right into the trap and never even saw the blow that

was meant to finish me. That I dodged it was due to no skill on my part, nothing but an accident. I tripped and stumbled over something at the right moment. The next, all four of us were inextricably involved. That sort of thing suits me, being built, as I am, something like a steam roller. I am no Carpentier, a thing of agility and grace, and my every movement is distinctly not a picture. The confined space also suited me; it's difficult to dodge a steam roller in an alley. The darkness suited me, too; I had three people to hit, my opponents only one; they had considerably more margin for mistakes, and they made them. Even so, I might not have survived, had it not been for an inquisitive policeman who promulgated himself into the proceedings; with unerring intelligence he centered his attentions on me so that, by the time explanations were in order, my adversaries were probably as far as Chestnut Street.

"Well, we've had a nice little go, officer, and no hard feelings," I said. "But those other birds started the show. Yes, maybe it is what they all say, but that doesn't make it less the truth. Yes, perhaps I was doing all the fighting; I had to. All right, I'll go home; I'm not looking for more. Too much is enough."

Alone in my room I found a rip in my coat where a knife had missed the jugular, discovered a gash on my left forearm, and located several

bumps on my head that had not been there when last inspected by the phrenologist. He would have called them, no doubt, bumps of folly and stupidity.

Thinking it all over, I decided anew that it was indeed time I returned to New York. After all, there is no place like home, and certainly jail is preferable to a coffin.

CHAPTER XI

I RETURN HOME

I LEFT my lodgings the following morning, unobtrusively, to say the least. As my landlady had had the forethought to secure the week's rent of my room in advance, there was no occasion to interview her, nor was I hampered by excess baggage. Early to bed and early to rise is a splendid maxim, and I was up and out before the sun—for the first time in many years. Perhaps the best thing to get a fellow out of bed bright and early is the fear of being murdered in it. At least it worked very successfully with me.

You may have gathered by this time that I am no hero, so I may as well admit it. Somehow, the idea of being potted from dark corners by somebody you don't even know, never appealed to me particularly. I was born with the failing. I don't mind a decent row now and then, but this clutching-hand game—no, thank you, it is not for me.

As I sneaked downstairs in the dark and left the house, via the back yard and a couple of fences, I could say with that hero in Dickens' yarn, "It is a far, far better thing I do than I have ever done; I go to a far, far better rest than I have ever

known." After all, perhaps I should be safest in jail.

Yes, there isn't a lazy bone in my body when it comes to keeping ahead of the emaciated old boy on the white horse, and that little affair in the alley was a hint I meant to take. Those three worthy fellows had been laying for me, and their purpose wasn't robbery. I wasn't worth robbing, nor do footpads use knives right off the reel. By all odds I should have gone west right then and there, with nobody knowing what had happened to me. I was supposed to be dead in any case; old Varney and Miss Gelette knew I wasn't, so did Frean and Joyce, but the former wouldn't worry if I never claimed resurrection, while it might suit the purpose of the latter for the general public to think me under the clover and violets.

Fantastic or not, I had to admit the possibility that the Black Company not only existed outside Corby's buttermilk brain, but that it was a far more ruthless criminal combine than I had imagined. Yes, and able, too; rather much so I assure you that alone in my room in that house with the door barricaded—for it wasn't a cheerful neighborhood—the possibility seemed considerably less fantastic than it had in Market Street when I was talking to Tim Scallon. I was quite ready to believe they had suspected me from the first and that I had been followed from Sea Bright; or word had

been sent on with a detailed description. They knew of my visit to the hospital, of my investigations, and, even while talking to Scallon, those fellows had been waiting to cook my goose.

I had been a fool, underrated the enemy and given myself away; and in coming here alone under an assumed name, and with strictly limited funds, I had played right into their hands. Thus situated, what could I hope to accomplish against a combine with such a spy system, who struck in the dark and without scruple? Nothing, and less than nothing. They knew where I lived. I would be dogged by people I didn't even know, and sooner or later put out of the way.

Adventure is all very well—I love it, especially when lying in bed armed with a good pipe—and perhaps there are some superhuman souls capable of grappling single-handed with such a situation as I faced, but assuredly I wasn't one of them, nor had I any longing to be. My inflated conception of my own ability and cleverness had received a bad puncture, and it behooved me to get out of this mess as quickly as I'd got into it.

If they thought me bottled up in that house, and were keeping watch on it, my early and unorthodox manner of departure fooled them, for I got safely aboard the New York train. Try though I might, I failed utterly to detect anything that would lead me to think I was being followed.

I bought a paper, expecting to find some announcement of my resurrection; surely it was time the yellow press got after me with such captions as "Lawton alive and hiding from justice. Hires tramp to assume his identity." Perhaps they would even hint that I had conspired to have my victim pulped by that train; that I had drugged, or murdered him offhand, and then placed him and the car on the tracks where they would do the most good. I expected to read something like that; but, no, there wasn't a word about me of any description. Why had Frean said nothing? It seemed to support the idea that he had reason to keep my resurrection secret. I wasn't exactly a national figure, but certainly, in view of that manslaughter charge, if nothing else, the papers would have something to say—even the most conservative—did they know I still lived. And now they treated me as though indeed I were a month-old corpse.

My trip was completed without incident, and when I got into the Pennsylvania Station I ran plump against Howard Roupell, the friend of all others whom I cared least to meet at that moment. He was a bore and gossip. I shoudn't have minded, indeed would have welcomed, Bob Hewitt or Tommy Ashton; but no, it had to be Roupell. He considered it his mission in life to tell alleged funny stories, and though I admit he's a first-class mimic, that sort of thing gets rather wearing at times,

especially when the perpetrator mistakes pure dirt for humor, as Roupell so frequently did. I am no puritan, but—well, there's a limit.

I hoped to dodge him, or that he wouldn't recognize me without my mustache, but that hope was vain indeed. Although fat and sleepy-looking, he can be very observant. He started back, gulped, threw wide his short arms and bellowed, "Mug! By all the saints, it's Mug!"

Now that's a pet name; it's only a few particular friends who call me that on occasion, fellows like Ashton and Hewitt who knew me at Princeton. They have a right to admire and remark on my beauty. Roupell wasn't in that category at all.

"It must be Mug!" he added. "Mustache or no mustache, there's no mistaking that face."

I dare say there isn't; all the same I didn't like to hear about it publicly from him, any more than I liked the flamboyant greeting that followed. He thumped me on the back, spluttered questions, pawed me all over, created quite a scene. I knew the old Falstaff meant well, and his joy at seeing me was flattering, joy at the return of the dead prodigal, but I didn't care to partake of the fatted calf right there on the public platform. People were stretching their necks and asking questions.

"Let's get out of this," I said. "I'm not on exhibition, Roupell. Yes, of course I'm alive. Do you think I'm a walking corpse? Didn't Frean tell

you and the bunch I wasn't dead, that it was all a mistake?"

"I haven't seen Frean for weeks; don't know where he is. And how should he know? Where have you been?"

"I haven't time to explain it all now. I'll see you later——"

"No! You must tell me now. Why, it's the most astounding thing that ever happened and you act as if it were nothing! Why, man, you're supposed to be dead and buried! Why, I even sent a wreath—a beautiful one—and went to the service and all that. I did indeed."

"And now it's all wasted. Too bad. But I'll do as much for you some day. No, I can't lunch with you; I'm sorry but I've an appointment——"

"No, you haven't—except with me. You've got to lunch with me. If you don't want publicity, we can go to my rooms. I must hear all about everything; I'm entitled to it. And I've got a new story, Lawton—the funniest thing you ever heard. You must——"

I managed to break loose, after promising to dine with him on the first opportunity. It went to his heart to see his prey escape; not only was I a new audience on which he could lavish his latest story, but I had a story of my own—I must have—which he wished to be the first to hear and publish. However, he had to be content with the mere fact

that I was alive, a startling enough news item, which I knew he would proceed forthwith to broadcast. I shuffled him off in the crowd and then hopped a taxi, giving the driver an address on lower Broadway. It was the address of old Hannay, my lawyer; I must see him first before surrendering myself to the law.

Mr. Hannay had known my family for twenty years and more, knew facts about them that even I didn't. He had had sole charge of my uncle's affairs and had always shown a fatherly sort of interest in me, perhaps because he was an old bachelor; indeed it was through him that I had been able to secure my first job with Cable & Co. He had helped me—unknown, I am sure, to my uncle—in many little ways like that. He was a lawyer of the old school, of the best type, and I knew that my conduct, since coming into the Lawton money, had wounded him terribly. I had proved a sore trial and disappointment.

Of course I now gave him a bad fright when I walked in on him, for, like Frean and Roupell, he had no difficulty in recognizing me; and yet, as he afterward was good enough to say, it was the happiest experience of his life. When he got his second wind he pumped my hand up and down, clapped me on the back, and all but wept over me. I had never suspected him of having such really great affection for me, and I was deeply touched.

"Resurrection!" he exclaimed, wiping his eyes. "And not only of the flesh, but of the spirit! Yes, it is; I can see it, anybody could. You are your old self, Peter. You are the young man who entered this office six months ago, full of ideals and high ambition——"

"And left it last full of idleness and rum? Exactly."

"No, I wouldn't say that, but——"

"It's the truth, and you know it. I've been taking a new kind of cure."

"Well, it's the best I ever heard of; whatever you've done, it's been a howling success. I never saw such a change in my life. For a dead man you're wonderfully, beautifully alive, your old self. Come now, tell me all about it. If I wasn't so happy, I'd be incensed with you—not to tell me before this that you were safe and sound."

"Yes, I owed you that, you of all people. But I thought it best to cut the whole crowd, let me be supposed to be dead. Well, I'll start at the beginning."

Now I had no intention of telling him a word about the Black Company, not that I didn't trust him above anybody; but shrewd and able though I knew him to be, he was really about the last person who would have credited the melodramatic and totally inadequate evidence I was prepared to supply. He was not a criminal lawyer, had little

imagination, and I knew would pooh-pooh the whole matter. In all probability he would think, though not say—and on this point I was acutely sensitive—that I was laboring under a hallucination conjured up initially by John Barleycorn. I didn't mean to say a word about it even to Hewitt or Ashton, intimate friends though they were. There was one person in New York to whom I meant to speak freely, one and one only; I had thought it all out and decided.

But, of course, I had to tell about Mr. Varney, just where I had been and how employed; that was bound to come out in any case. So I proceeded to give a slightly revised version of what had happened since I left the Princeton Inn that memorable night.

"It all came from a drunken bet—at least *I* was drunk," I explained. "But it turned out to be the best thing for me. I've discovered there's nothing better for my sort than getting up at six in the morning, looking after three cars, and doing odd jobs around a big house. I've been sampling the sort of stuff I was reared on—plain grub, lots of work, and no drink. I've found it's the only kind that suits me if I want to stay above ground, and I've come back to put in a few good licks at the plans of that engineering school and other stuff you and I mapped out. No more thick days or

nights for me; I've had my lesson and I'm through, eternally through."

"I see that a miracle has happened," he exclaimed, shaking hands with me all over again. "I believe that, of all the Lawtons, you are going to break the terrible family curse. I thought it from the first day I saw you, and now I know it."

"I only hope you're right, Mr. Hannay. Anyway, I'm going to do my level best. If prohibition ever comes to this country I guess it will be mainly because of people like me; I mean other fellows who can take a drink decently, and perhaps be all the better for it, will have to suffer through my failing."

"It's more than that, my boy."

"Yes, I know it. I believe some doctors say that you can't inherit such a craving, any more than you can inherit T. B., but I know better. Certainly I didn't have to learn to like the stuff; it's a gift. I've caught this thing just in time and, seeing you can't make a fellow drink by main force, the Lawton curse will have to peter out right here."

"I'm sure it will, my boy. You've had your lesson."

"Yes, but I've yet to pay for it. I wanted to see you first, get the plans about that free engineering school settled, and some other stuff, too; so let us go to it while I'm still free."

"Free? Are you thinking of getting married?"

"Yes, but the lady isn't—at least to me. What I meant, of course, was that Roupell knows I've turned up, and that means the whole town, sooner or later—generally sooner. I prefer to surrender myself."

"To whom? And for what?"

"Why, to the police, of course. You know, for that double charge of manslaughter. I hope you believe, Mr. Hannay, I didn't know anything about killing that poor woman and child. Honestly, I hadn't the faintest idea——"

"But, my dear boy, you didn't kill them!"

"What!" I cried, springing to my feet. "Do—do you really mean that?"

"Of course I do," said Mr. Hannay, beaming on me. "You've been blaming yourself quite unnecessarily; you aren't guilty and never were."

CHAPTER XII

THE RETURNED PRODIGAL

IT is impossible to describe adequately the effect that this news had on me, to convey the relief I felt; it seemed too good, far too good, to be true, and yet Mr. Hannay spoke with such complete assurance and authority as to preclude all doubt. Somehow, in some manner, I had escaped after all! These torturing thoughts of mine had had no real basis in fact. I had been a trusting fool, the victim of a cruel lie. Ah, Frean——

"So it never happened?" I cried. "Frean knew I hadn't seen the papers—I told him so—and that I wouldn't want to see them, read about what I was supposed to have done. He banked on that. He wanted me to run away and hide. There was no accident, no woman and child——"

"Oh, yes, there was," interrupted Mr. Hannay. "And both were killed; that's all quite true. But don't you see that if your car was stolen it entirely exculpates you?"

From the heights I plunged anew into the depths. I felt like hitting the good Mr. Hannay for having raised such false hopes. "It doesn't exculpate me at all!" I exclaimed. "I only wish it did!"

"Why doesn't it?"

"Because it doesn't! Any fool knows that. Don't you see that Camden——" And I repeated what Frean had said. "Excuse me for being so short with you, Mr. Hannay, but you don't know what I've been through in the way of remorse, and these false hopes——"

"But, my dear boy, they aren't false; not a bit of it. I wouldn't say so if I wasn't absolutely sure. It's quite true that Red Bank is on the route you took, and that your assailant, in going from Sea Bright to Camden, would have no reason to pass through it. Yet the facts are that he *did*."

"What! How do you know?"

"Well, you say you met Mr. Varney and his niece in their car at about nine o'clock?"

"Yes, I'm perfectly sure of that. When I left my car, I noticed by the illuminated clock that it was a quarter to nine."

"And it was after ten when the woman and child were run over in Red Bank," said Mr. Hannay. "There is no question about that, and if you'd happened to read the account in the paper you'd have known it. Here it is; see for yourself." And he handed me the paper in question.

"Yes, I see that!" I exclaimed, reading the paragraph he had marked. "By George, I—I——" In my relief I got up and shook him by both hands. An unbearable load had lifted from my heart. After all, I *had* escaped! The fatality had occurred at ten

minutes past ten, and at that time I was lying unconscious behind a hedge near the Sea Bright station.

And then a horrible doubt assailed me. "But can I prove it?" I cried. "Will anybody believe me? I'm sure about the time; I observed other details accurately that night, even though I was hopelessly drunk. I observed things that were afterward proved to be correct. But you see what people will say—that I was drunk and couldn't have known the time."

"But Mr. Varney and his niece weren't drunk," said Mr. Hannay. "They will be able at least to approximate the hour when you talked with them at the crossroads. You may be sure of that."

"Yes, but I don't think Mr. Varney would lift a finger to save me from the gallows. I told you what happened when I was discharged. He hates me."

"U-m-m," murmured Mr. Hannay. "Just so. Well, we can do without his evidence, if need be. There's the man Taylor to prove where and how he found you early the next morning. If it was you who came back through Red Bank, how could the car be smashed to flinders at Camden near midnight and you found half unconscious at Sea Bright five hours later? How could you get there without being seen? No, it's impossible on the face of it. I tell you that the fact of another person having

the car, and being killed in your place, explains everything, and we won't have any trouble proving your innocence."

"I only hope so," I said, "but Mr. Varney's evidence may be absolutely necessary. Now, Mr. Hannay, you've known my family since before I was born; you know, I dare say, things that even I don't?"

"Possibly," said the old lawyer cautiously.

"Well, have you ever heard of Theodore Varney previous to this? Do you know of any reason why he should be so bitter against my family? For I tell you it wasn't merely that I'd imposed on him; he had forgiven me posing as Joyce until he heard my real name. Then he went right up in the air. It wasn't that he believed me guilty of those two deaths and thought I was a coward in hiding; that was only part of it. Back of it all was a dislike for me personally because I was Peter Lawton. I'm sure of that."

Mr. Hannay stroked his chin. "Well, I suppose I'd better tell you, my boy; I can't very well keep it back now. He hates you because you are your father's son. You see, Mr. Varney was deeply in love with your mother."

I wasn't so greatly astonished at this information, for some such idea had occurred to me that morning in the car, when Varney spoke so bitterly of my father. "Then it is merely a case of a jealous

and disappointed suitor still nursing a fancied grievance? Come, tell me all you know."

"Well, with all due respect to the dead, I'm afraid your father hardly treated Mr. Varney fairly —nor did your mother, either, for that matter. I knew all the interested parties personally, and can speak with authority. Varney and your father were very intimate friends, and it was the former who introduced the latter to the then Miss Canning. Varney and she had known each other almost from childhood, and though there was no official engagement it was common knowledge that they cared for each other, were pledged, in fact, and would eventually marry. Indeed, Varney confided this to his chum, your father. At this time, also—when your father first met your mother—the same understanding existed between your father and Varney's only sister——"

"Phew!" I exclaimed. "You can't mean Brenda Gelette's mother?"

"I do, Peter. You see the fearful mix-up that followed? Your father and mother fell in love with each other at first sight, one of those passionate, all-sacrificing attachments, not unknown to human history, which is bound to promote or end in tragedy. Miss Varney seems to have survived the shock of their sudden elopement—at least she eventually married—but it certainly ruined her brother's life.

"I should never have told you all this if you hadn't insisted," finished Mr. Hannay kindly, "and don't think I've exaggerated or overstated the case. Your mother was an honorable woman, your father an honorable man, and, though I've no experience of such things, it is clear that in this instance their mutual attachment overcame every scruple. But Mr. Varney is entirely wrong if he says your father broke your mother's heart. He did so only by dying—and she followed him quickly. Nor did he die in an alcoholic ward, as your Uncle Peter claimed, though I can't pretend he conserved either his fortune or his health."

"Well," I said at length, "it's not for me to judge. At any rate, I now understand Mr. Varney's cordial dislike for me, and I must say I don't blame him. I only wish I'd known about it."

I proceeded to put some adroit questions to the old lawyer concerning Mr. Varney, for here was one who had known him and his brother intimately and who might unwittingly give me some clew to the other's connection with the Black Company. I succeeded, however, in learning nothing that Scallon hadn't told me already.

We now discussed more material matters connected with my affairs, and I learned that my will had not been probated, and that my old quarters in the Belvedere, on Madison Avenue, were just as I had left them. I was glad to hear, too,

that Watkins, whom I had had since starting my new mode of life, was still at his post.

"As you know," said Mr. Hannay, "the lease isn't up till the end of the year, and Watkins begged to be allowed to remain in charge of the apartments till they were sublet. It's a funny thing, but he said from the first he had a feeling you weren't dead at all, and might come walking in any day. About giving your story to the press, of course, you can't avoid that. Is it possible to keep Mr. Varney's name out of it?"

"Unfortunately not. Frean would tell all about my employment there if I didn't. By the way, has he made it up with his father? I heard he hadn't, but I'm not certain."

"You may be certain. The scamp's getting money from some quarter, according to all accounts of the way he's living, though I don't know who would employ him even for his parents' sake."

"Where do you suppose he's getting it from?"

Mr. Hannay shrugged. "Considering that crooked brokerage deal—he ought to have been jailed—I shouldn't be surprised if he was interested in some bucket shop, probably as a tout. A thoroughly bad egg, if you want my opinion. I hope you'll steer clear of him in future, Peter; he can't bring you any good. No, he can never make things right with his family, the time for that is past and the break is absolute and final. His people

have stood all that is humanly possible, far more than is generally known. There are some people you can't do anything with, no matter how hard you try; people who seem to have no morals, in whom there is nothing to appeal. Arnold Frean is one of them; he never was any good and he never will be. I never could understand what you saw in him, why you made a companion of him."

"But I didn't," I replied. "He was at Princeton with me, you know, and after all, that means something. But I hardly knew him at college; we weren't in the same year, and in entirely different sets——"

"I dare say," interrupted Mr. Hannay grimly. "You'd no money to throw around then."

"No, and he had. He had too much. It wasn't until after I inherited Uncle Peter's check book that I really knew Frean, and I can't say I know much about him even now. I met him as I met dozens of others, people you don't seem to meet unless you've money. Perhaps you can tell me who his intimate friends are——"

"No, and I don't care; nobody to be proud of, I'll wager. And now, my boy, we'll trot down and see the district attorney; we just have time. There is another point in that newspaper article to which I wish to call your attention; you may have overlooked it. It states distinctly that the car came from the south and turned west, whereas

you would have come from the north. Having no idea it wasn't you who were driving, the only supposition was that you'd gone south, returned to Red Bank, and struck out for Camden, aiming possibly at Philadelphia. But I doubt if you actually passed through Red Bank at all, for why was the car and its license number noted only on the return trip? No, you may rest assured that we'll have no difficulty in establishing your innocence."

Nor had we, at least nothng approaching what I had expected. But I couldn't help wondering what my reception would have been had I been poor and unknown. I don't mean to say that I could have bought an immunity bath, or clogged the wheels of justice with gold pieces, but—well, wealth and position certainly make a difference. Witness Frean's case, the influence that kept him out of jail. The mere fact that a man like Mr. Hannay was my friend made a profound difference in itself, and a story that might have seemed incredible from the lips of a pauper, seemed otherwise when voiced by a millionaire. At all events it was credited and, pending corroboration from Varney and the man Taylor—a mere matter of form, I was assured—I was released on my own recognizance. Of course I was entitled to be released, for I wasn't guilty, but had I been poor and unknown I should have been remanded to

jail while my story was being investigated. That is the difference, I suppose, between wealth and poverty, influence and nonentity.

It was nearing six o'clock when I left the Tombs and, saying farewell to Mr. Hannay, boarded a subway local. At Fourteenth Street I got out, intending to change to the uptown express. The station presented its usual bedlam rush-hour appearance, and I had some trouble in bucking my way through to the first row waiting to rush the doors. I thought I heard my name called, but could see no one I knew. Then, just as the express drew in, some one gave me a violent shove, and I pitched headfirst to the rails.

I don't know to this day how I escaped. Nobody does. By all odds, I should have been pulped under the wheels or "third-railed" into eternity as quick as winking. I imagine, perhaps, my old football training helped me; I mean I knew instinctively how to fall without breaking any bones, and even if tackled and thrown from a totally unexpected quarter, to keep my wits and go on thinking. At all events I hit on my shoulder and scrambled over to the downtown rails in some occult fashion as the express with screeching brakes shot past, far too close for comfort.

Having no wish to figure further in the papers, I scrambled on to the downtown platform, waved a hand to the gaping crowd to show I was unhurt,

and dodged up the steps to the street before most of the people realized what it was all about. I had got off with a bruised shoulder, though the Black Company had meant my life. It was a nice reception for a returned prodigal!

CHAPTER XIII

AT THE ADMIRAL

THIS and last night's affair was asking too much of coincidence. They must be related and instigated by the same hand, and I decided to finish the rest of my homeward trip by taxi. I had been foolish not to return in the one that brought Mr. Hannay and myself to the Tombs.

As I reached the sidewalk, on the opposite side of the street, somebody stepped up quickly behind me and, my nerves being jumpy by this time, I whirled round with ready fist, thinking another play was being made for my life. Indeed I had almost swatted the man before I recognized him as Tommy 'Ashton. The relief was so great that I burst out laughing.

I may pass over our initial greeting; Ashton, of course, was delighted to see me, but not greatly astonished, for news of my miraculous return was pretty well over town by this time and, no doubt, would appear in the evening papers.

"Yes, I've a story to tell, but I don't want to tell it here," I said, anxious to get away from the scene of my recent "accident" before Ashton got wind of it. "I've told it three or four times already

to-day so it's getting pretty monotonous. Suppose you come home with me and then we'll call up Hewitt——"

"Bob's in Florida on business and won't be back for a month or more—the plans of that new hotel at Ormond, you know. I'm leaving for Philly myself in an hour or so. Let's beat it to the Admiral for a bite and your story; that's all I've time for."

"My story will keep, Tommy, and you'll see it in the papers——"

"I want it at first hand—now. I'm entitled to it. Come on."

So we hopped a taxi—I said I wanted to dodge reporters—to the huge new hotel where Ashton, a bachelor, had recently installed himself, and secured a quiet corner table in the grill. He received a shock when I turned down the wine card but, a true friend, climbed up on the wagon beside me.

"Far be it from me to add to your temptations," he said as I protested. "And it's really no sacrifice on my part. I know what it is to have that stuff shoved under your nose. I must say you're looking prime, Pete, whatever you've been doing with yourself. If you're really on this water-wagon game for good——"

"I am, booked through for life. I mean it, Tommy."

"Shake hands on that!" he exclaimed. "I believe

you *do* mean it and that you're capable of pulling it off. You've changed a whole lot; even the loss of that alleged mustache is an improvement. And now let's hear all about it."

"Well, to begin with, if I didn't win that bet I came mighty near it. I earned my keep by the sweat of my brow for three whole weeks, if not a month. You see——" And I proceeded to tell the whole thing over again, omitting, as heretofore, all reference to the Black Company.

"Well?" queried Ashton as I finished.

"Well what?"

"Your adventures are all very interesting, but what about the rest?"

"There isn't any more; I've told you everything."

"Oh, no, you haven't; you've omitted the most interesting part."

"I don't know what you mean."

Ashton raised his eyes and they met mine over the planked steak. "You're a poor sort of liar, Pete; you always were, even if an industrious one, and you forget I'm a lawyer. Also, my friend, I saw what happened on the subway platform."

"Oh, that accident? Was it you who called me? There was such a crowd, and you see I fell——"

"Naturally, after such a shove. It's no use, Pete; I was there and saw the whole thing. Yes, I was on my way up here. I couldn't get near

you, and the fellow who did it escaped in the crowd."

"He didn't mean to shove me; it was an accident, or he was drunk."

"Neither one nor the other, and you know it. Why, when I overhauled you, you almost smashed me! You thought I was going to jump you. Somebody's after your life, Pete, and you can't tell me anything different. Aside from all else, the way you keep looking round as though expecting——"

"I'm looking at Frean," I said. "He has just come in. I hope he doesn't land over here."

But he did, seeing that I observed him. "Killing the fatted calf, eh, Ashton?" he greeted.

Ashton received him coldly and didn't ask him to join us; nor, naturally, did I. Frean didn't appear to notice this; he draped his elegant person over the back of a chair and smiled at us, particularly at me. There was something very irritating in his smile.

"Lawton's been having a wonderful time," he continued. "I suppose he has been telling you all about it? Romantic rural drama, you know, with me for the villain of the piece. Only for me, he'd still be down in Sea Bright washing automobiles and paying court to the cook. I turned up at the wrong time."

"I thought," said I, keeping my temper, "you'd

have spread the joyful news of my being alive. It seems you didn't. I wonder why?"

"Why should I?" he asked blandly. "I'm not your press agent, no, nor your conscience either. It wouldn't have been a very friendly act to set the police after you. I knew you'd give yourself up; better late than never. I don't suppose you're hiding here, eh? Oh, no offense, Lawton; don't get excited now, it's so dangerous for a man of your build. I'm afraid you'll have a stroke some day. Well, cheerio; I've got to amble. Sorry I can't partake of the fatted calf."

"Rotter!" muttered Ashton, as Frean smiled himself off. "It's clear he doesn't believe your car was stolen, so I didn't say anything about your satisfactory interview with the district attorney. Let him find it out for himself; it'll make him mad. He never liked you, Pete, even at college. I've always felt that."

"I suppose he didn't, and yet I hardly knew him."

"No, but he knew you, of course. That little set of decadent highbrows he flocked with had no use for Brokaw Field; they were jealous of any reputation made there. There's a set like that at every university, more's the pity; fake highbrows who pretend to scoff at athletics, fake high priests of culture. He has turned out just what I expected."

"I'm sorry for his people, yes, and for him too.

I mean, Tommy, I know what it is to have too much money; believe me, it's worse than having too little. Oh, I don't mean in a physical sense; but if you aren't mighty careful, it rots you body and soul. I've been through it and you haven't. I think Frean's people are to blame in a way; they shouldn't have allowed him all that dough——"

"You're too soft, Pete. I've tried to help Frean but I'm through, like all his friends, and you are too, if you've any sense. Cut him out; he's a total loss. I haven't even words to waste on him, for I want to hear about this enemy who's trying to measure you for a wooden kimono. Who is it? Come, out with it!"

"I'd rather not, Tommy, if you don't mind. Of course, it isn't a question of not trusting you or anything like that; aside from all else, I don't want you to get mixed up in it. It isn't any little simple affair—no, I won't tell you——"

But I did; I had to. He gave me no peace until I had told him practically everything. Ashton was like that, pertinacious and dogged; he would have stuck to me all night, canceled his Philadelphia engagement, until he had got the truth out of me. Nor was it simply curiosity on his part, though he had seen and guessed so much that he was dying to hear all; no, he had a very real regard for me and wished to be of service. After all, I couldn't have had a better adviser; he was junior

member of a noted criminal law firm and well on the way to making a name for himself. All the same I didn't want to tell him.

"Well, that's the queerest thing I ever heard, and I've heard some queer things in my time," he said as I finished. "The Black Company! No relation, I suppose, to Conan Doyle's 'White Company?'"

"I knew you'd laugh, Tommy, but——"

"I'm not laughing; not a bit of it. But if I hadn't actually seen that fellow shove you—and at that I never got a good look at him. I think I was the only one who saw him do what he did. What sort of a combine is it? And the Black King! It must be some political conspiracy, not necessarily against America. I mean actively. For instance, there may be a plot brewing to put a new ruler on one of the tottering thrones of Europe; they're all pretty wabbly these days. And, of course, if wind of this plot got known—you see it may mean a new ally for the Central Powers——"

"I've thought of all that, but Varney could have nothing to do with it."

"You never can tell; he's living at Sea Bright and that's Washington, you may say, for the next three months. Every political adventurer will make it his stamping ground. Intrigue is in the air; everybody seems to be engaged in it and the country is overrun with secret agents. It may not be a

coincidence that this summer Varney should be a neighbor of President Wilson. No, you can't tell, Pete; he may have more interest in world politics than you or any one imagines. Why, if I'm not mistaken, his brother has some political job. This alleged disease may be only a blind, something to keep him under cover——"

"I don't believe Varney has anything to do with the Black Company; I mean he's not a member but a potential victim, though I don't know in what way."

"And yet he's intimate with Frean who, you say, is a member?"

"Yes, on probation—according to the man Corby. You see I really know nothing for certain; I can't find out anything. It's all guesswork, but after those two attempts on my life I can't think the thing a joke; at least I fail to see the humor. The whole thing is so bizarre that the police would only laugh at me; you know they would. I haven't any real evidence to give them."

Ashton nodded and fell silent. "You were wise in keeping this to yourself," he said at length. "I understand why you didn't want to tell even me. Of course it won't get past me. But it's far too big a thing for any amateur handling; it may prove bigger even than we suspect. And we've got to do something, Pete. Now there's only one man to handle a case like this—Lisping Jimmie."

"I agree with you. He's the very man I had in mind from the first, the only man I meant to tell. I've got the money and can give him a free hand till the cows come home. That's one advantage of wealth."

"Well, see him first thing to-morrow," said Ashton with decision. "I would say to-night only that I happen to know he's in Washington and won't be home till to-morrow. See him as soon as you can. Meanwhile I'll see what I can find out in Philly. As it turns out, it's a providential thing that I've got to go there to-night, that I met you and had this talk. You drew blank in Philly, but I should have better luck; I mean that I'm educated to the investigating business and you aren't. I think I'll be able to find out something for Blunt to work on, put him that much ahead of the game."

"Well, for Heaven's sake, be careful, Tommy! You don't know these fellows. I'd much rather you stood out of it; I do indeed——"

"Rats!" laughed Ashton. "I've legitimate business there and they'll never suspect me. Anyway, I'm a match for these cowardly highbinders. You'll see."

CHAPTER XIV

I CONSULT LISPING JIMMIE

THE following morning found me in the offices of the Blunt Detective Agency. James Blunt, popularly known the length and breadth of the land as "Lisping Jimmie," represented the best criminal-investigaton talent in the market, and I knew that I would need the best. At heart I didn't believe that Ashton would be able to learn any more than I had. Blunt, however, would.

It was the first time I had met him, though I had followed his record, like every one else, since he first leaped into fame as a headquarters "bull" in the old Mulberry Street days. Since then he had further gilded his name, and incidentally his pocket, in a dozen famous cases, and the reputation of the private agency he had established was so high that its services were even enlisted for difficult government jobs.

Naturally, such talent did not stoop to picayune cases, nor were its fees picayune, either; James Blunt was the foremost specialist in moral diseases of society, and entitled to a specialist's prices, yet he wasn't mercenary.

Many stories have been woven round his remark-

able personality—among others, that his name was assumed, and that he had left Yale under romantic circumstances—but what undoubtedly endeared him to the man in the street was the fact that his humanity was as big as his intellect, that love for his profession took precedence over all else, and that he had handled many a case for nothing. If you were in a hole without a red cent, and your wail reached the quick ears of Lisping Jimmie, he would pull you out for nothing. Another fact was—and undoubtedly this was responsible for his great and continued success—he took a hand personally in every case, and worked as hard as any of his operatives.

Even now, when his reputation and fortune were made, he didn't content himself with lying back in a chair and throwing orders at subordinates. I knew then that the difficult business of the Black Company would be cleaned up as quickly as possible, and that if he couldn't do it, none could.

"Before I begin, Mr. Blunt," I said, after introducing myself, "I want you to believe that, no matter what you may have heard about me, what I'm about to relate can't be charged to the account of John Barleycorn. In the vernacular, however bizarre or fantastic it may seem, it's not the dream of a booze fighter. If we start with that understanding, we'll get on much better."

He removed his nose glasses—I had heard they

didn't magnify, and that his vision was really hawklike—and rubbed them with a pale heliotrope silk handkerchief that matched his scarf and socks. I had already verified the story that his dress was fastidious and exquisite. For the rest there was nothing of the traditional sleuth about him. He looked just the sort of average, clean-cut, successful young business man you see everywhere. His eyes were remarkably far apart, and with the pronounced lumps over them which are supposed to denote the calculating faculty, while in his manner there was a hint of languor and affectation which I knew to be characteristic.

"Mr. Lawton," he replied, with a faint, pleasing smile, and the peculiar lisp that had earned him his nickname, and which I needn't attempt to reproduce, "you can't say anything in the bizarre line too strong for me. After fifteen years' experience I've come to the conclusion, like some investigators in other lines, that in this world nothing is impossible. As for the rest, whatever popular legend may say of your thirst, I should give it as my opinion, if appearance goes for anything, that you haven't overindulged it for at least three weeks."

"That's quite true," I said. "Of course, you've seen the morning papers, so I needn't explain where I've been for those three weeks. But there's another news item to which I wish to draw your

attention—that of the unknown man who was nearly killed last evening by a subway express."

"Yes, I saw it. Supposed to be a would-be suicide who repented providentially at the last moment, or the victim of an accident. So you were that man, and it was a deliberate play for your life? Oh, yes, it's an old dodge, but safe if pulled off right."

It was a comfort to meet an intellect that marched ahead instead of trailing behind; that made its own swift, unerring deductions, instead of asking a lot of long-winded questions; that could believe without having chapter, verse, and argument.

"Have you ever heard," I said, "of an organization calling itself the Black Company? A body of presumably sane men, representing such a fantastic idea as the black chessmen, who are known to one another as bishops, pawns, and so forth, and who even correspond by means of a secret code compiled from imaginary chess games? There's something bizarre for you, Mr. Blunt. And yet it was a member of such an organization that made the play for my life last night. Don't ask me how I know. I haven't a shred of evidence, yet I'm absolutely sure of it."

At first mention of the secret society, I noticed that the rather sleepy look departed from Mr. Blunt's eyes. "Dear me," he said mildly, "this promises to be a bit interesting. I'm something of a chess crank myself."

He pushed a button under his desk, and to a long-nosed man who entered said briskly: "The evidence in the Joe Turner and Andy Quigg cases, Fleming. Oh, yes, and the Isaac Goldmann affair."

Fleming disappeared, reappeared, and disappeared again like a phantom, the only evidence of his movements being a loose-leaf volume which he left at his employer's elbow.

"Now for your story, Mr. Lawton," said Blunt, and I opened up and told everything. I related every little incident from the time I left Princeton on that crazy ride, to the moment of my entering Blunt's office. I made a secret of nothing, for I even related what Hannay had told me about my father and Mr. Varney.

If I am ordered to build a bridge or construct a dam, I don't expect some of the blue prints to be held out on me, and that was the way I felt about this. I was engaging a master workman, and if I wanted results, it was up to me to see he had all the specifications. I think I told the whole thing in as few words as possible, for he never asked a question, merely taking several notes in shorthand as I went along.

"Now, that's absolutely all of it," I finished, "and here's the note I got from Corby and the two code messages. I won't be springing some all-important fact on you at the eleventh hour, and I don't think for a minute I can teach you your

business any more than you can teach me mine. I'm not here to obstruct, but to help, if I can, and I'll take orders, not give them. Finally, I'm not out for revenge on anybody, even Frean, and if the whole thing can be kept quiet, so much the better. If there's a criminal gang after Varney I want it squelched, that's all, and I don't care what money or personal effort I spend in doing it."

"Mr. Lawton," he said dryly, "any time you think of giving up the engineering profession and want another job, come to me. I don't distribute compliments idly, but I say that of the many people who have tried at various times to teach me my business, you certainly would be the most qualified. As a client, your brevity, clearness, candor, and grasp of essential detail have been a refreshing surprise, while your whole conduct of this case has been very creditable indeed. Your only mistake was in saying anything to Mr. Scallon and this friend of yours."

"I couldn't get out of telling Ashton; he saw that affair in the subway. He is to be trusted absolutely. I've known him since prep school days, and can answer for his character and ability. He's as sharp, close, and true as a wolf trap."

"Well, that's something, and I'm inclined to believe you're a pretty good judge of character."

"As for Scallon, I wasn't taking any chances

and so I didn't say a word about the Black Company. I was afraid he might pass it on unwittingly."

"Yes, but, of course, you see the whole point is this: that though you didn't say anything about the Black Company, you did ask a lot of questions about Mr. Varney. You may have been overheard, and they could put two and two together, especially if they knew you'd been to the hospital asking about Joyce. Up to that point I believe you may have succeeded in disarming suspicion to a great extent; they didn't know if you were really harmless or dangerous. Once they were sure that you were dangerous, they tried to short circuit you before you could use your money and information against them, and they'll keep on trying for revenge if nothing else."

"Yes, I suppose they will. Then you really know something about this secret society?"

"It has been suspected for some time that such an organization existed, but up to the present our only grounds for suspicion lay in these three cases," picking up the loose-leaf volume from his desk. "And by 'we' I mean not only this agency, but the police departments of New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. All three cases happened in these three cities, and within the past two years. The first was that of a young medical student called Turner; shot and killed one night in Broad Street, Philadelphia. Assailant unknown. Last conscious words

were: 'The Black Company.' Here, then, is the first and last mention we have of that name. The second case happens six months later in Beacon Street, Boston, and at night also. A saloon keeper named Andy Quigg is stabbed through the lungs, and expires in the arms of a policeman, murmuring 'The King's Rook's Pawn.' The third and last case happens here one night last winter, on Fourth Avenue. Jewish rabbi, name of Isaac Goldmann, garroted on returning home from the synagogue. Found on him was a typewritten chess game in the algebraic notation, and a half-defaced phrase running: 'This is the secret code of——' Some policeman very obligingly destroyed this paper as unimportant before I had a chance to see it."

Mr. Blunt replaced the book on the desk and went on: "Now, here we have three victims in three different walks of life, in three cities, and of widely different ages—a young medical student, a middle-aged saloon keeper, and an old rabbi. In no case was robbery the motive, nor would the personal histories of these three men seem to suggest their being mixed up with criminals in any way. Of the three, certainly not Rabbi Goldmann, who was something of an idol among his people on the East Side. Turner belonged to a rich family, while Quigg was prosperous and respectable. Nothing was ever discovered by the police that would throw any light on these three murders.

"You understand," he finished, "that those three were distinctively police cases, and that this is the first time I've had a case dealing with the Black Company. I may say that the police have little if any belief that such an organization exists, and, lacking all evidence, in face of six months' silence, I was beginning to think I had attached, privately, too much significance to those three cases, when you now walk in and confirm all my suspicions."

"You agree with me, then, that it's a criminal organization, not politico-social or connected in any way with this Prussian propaganda, but simply out for profit?"

"In the main, yes. But I know no more about it than you. They may employ everything, from blackmail to burglary—though not of the crude variety. It is clear that they are rich, powerful, clever, and utterly unscrupulous. We know of these three murders. But how many more have occurred —the sort of 'accident' that happened to you last night? They are not a band of ordinary thugs. And so," he added gravely, "you're a marked man, Mr. Lawton. You've kicked up an invaluable find at great peril to yourself. You have discovered and solved their secret code, and you know three of their members. They haven't prevented you from delivering that information, but I warn you they will try to take it out of your hide. I'll get you a permit to pack a gun, and detail a man to shadow

you. You won't like it, I know, but lack of precaution or foolhardiness is only playing the other fellow's game.

"Now," he continued, "you might have saved yourself that trip to the hospital for it was a foregone conclusion that Joyce wouldn't tell a story that could be so easily disproved. That fellow at Varney's is the real Joyce, and his stay in the hospital accounts for you being able to take his place for so long. He was out of his head for a week, and therefore couldn't notify his superiors what had happened, and they naturally thought he was on the job. As soon as he was able, he put them wise, and so for at least a week they knew you were an impostor. That explains why you got no more code messages, and why Corby told you nothing further. I don't pretend to understand the fact of Joyce and you being robbed by the same party; it may be no more than a coincidence, or it may mean the entrance of a complicating factor —some enemy of the secret society, though that doesn't explain his attack on you. We must follow that line, try to discover the man's identity. Unfortunately the remains are useless for that purpose. In general appearance, of course, he resembled you, but can you add some definite detail?"

"Yes. I noticed a striking deformity. As he pointed out the imaginary lights of New York with his left hand—he had the crank in his right ready

to wallop me—I saw that it had six fingers, or, more correctly, five and a thumb. Now, I also saw that night more than one moon in the sky, yet I'm sure about this extra finger; it was rudimentary and as if stuck on to the little one. That hand must have been cut to pieces in the accident, or it would have proved that the victim wasn't Peter Lawton."

"Yes, he was so badly mangled that we'll never be able to prove that extra finger. All the same, and despite your confession as to the abnormal number of moons, this is a valuable item. Now," switching the conversation suddenly to another subject, "what do you know about this friend of yours, Howard Roupell? Why was he at the station?"

"He told me he had come to meet a friend who hadn't turned up." I then added that Roupell was no more than an acquaintance, one of the many I had made six months ago. "I really know very little about him except that he's a retired broker and man about town. One of the kind you may meet for years and never know any better. He's a member of one of my clubs, and goes in a bit for first nights, the bottle, and bridge. Of course he can't have anything to do with this business; a genial old Falstaff, if a bit of a bore, and about the last person you'd think of being mixed up with murder and sudden death."

"You never can tell," said Mr. Blunt, with his

faint, pleasing smile. "Superfluous flesh is a great asset to malefactors. If you want to be a really successful crook, you must first feed up, for no jury likes to convict a fat man. They can't believe he's really so bad as he's painted. Of course, Mr. Roupell didn't shove you in front of that train, but he may have deputed a pawn to do so. I've an idea that in this agreeable organization the pawns do all the actual dirty work, until, as in the game of chess, they reach the eighth file and are promoted; then they become a capital piece, with a pawn of their own to direct. Perhaps they are advanced a square according to a certain number of successful enterprises. Who knows? Meanwhile we'll take a run down to Center Street and see if you can recognize anybody in the gallery. It's better than my private collection."

Although, for the sake of clearness, I have given our dialogue in sequence, it was really broken up into brief lisping sentences, and had frequent interruptions. Lisping Jimmie wasn't given to rounded periods, and, moreover, had a trick of leaving phrases unfinished. You had to march ahead with him, grasp the conclusion which he considered obvious, or be left in a hopeless muddle; and while he talked he worked. The long-nosed phantom, Fleming, was out and in the room constantly, taking the briefest but clearest orders. When we left to visit the rogues' gallery, trailed by a couple

of operatives to see if any one followed us, the efficiency machinery of the famous agency had been set in motion against the enemy.

It did not need Blunt's reminder to convince me that the task set us was no easy one, and might consume months. The securing of the necessary evidence against such an astute and cunning organization as this had shown itself to be would require infinite patience and caution, as well as enterprise. Obviously, it wasn't a simple matter of arresting Joyce, Corby, and Frean out of hand; even if we had the authority, based on the proper evidence, that would be only scotching the tail of the venomous reptile.

"What we want are the men higher up," said Blunt. "Of course, they're warned now. It's an even chance that they know of your visit to me. In that case they may abandon whatever game they're up to with Mr. Varney."

"Do you know anything of this peculiar disease of his?" I asked. "I mean, could the symptoms of Bronze Skin be produced by artificial means, say some chemical?"

"I don't think so, but that's one of the things we'll have to find out. We must follow every line."

Naturally I didn't like the idea of Mr. Varney's past being probed, but there was no help for it. The greatest puzzle was why Joyce should have

been installed in the house, what connection there was between Varney and the Black Company. I was convinced it was a wholly innocent one on his part, that he was a prospective victim, but Blunt was taking nothing for granted. He meant to investigate everything and everybody.

"Your theory that they're attempting his life by some subtle poison which gives the symptoms of Addison's disease is ingenious," he said. "He first developed it in Philadelphia, you say, the reputed headquarters of the society. And it would explain Joyce's presence if the poison had to be constantly administered. Yes, it's ingenious, but not sound, for it doesn't explain Frean's or Corby's part. No, we have yet to find the key move to this problem."

"In that code message what does it mean by 'Varney moves on second?' Has it a hidden meaning, or are we to take it literally? It may mean any square from king's rook's to queen's rook's second—any one of eight squares. Is something to happen on that particular square? I've racked my brains but I can't get any meaning out of it."

"It may mean a date."

"But Varney isn't going to move anywhere on the second; he's booked there for the summer. Anyway, that's one thing they don't know—that I found that message."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," said Blunt.

"It's hard to say what they know or don't know. They seem to have an excellent spy system. How long is your friend, Mr. Ashton, staying in Philadelphia?"

"Two or three days."

"Oh!" said Lisping Jimmie, and I caught a rather queer look in his eyes, which I was to remember later.

Our visit to the gallery was a distinct failure. I scrutinized profiles and full faces of every conceivable type, until I was almost dizzy, but in no case could I identify one as that of Joyce or Corby. Curiously enough, the only photo that stirred my memory had nothing to do with that worthy couple. "See here," I said, pointing it out. "If this fellow had a mustache, he'd look like the one that stole my car. At least, he reminds me of him. He had a hook nose and bushy brows like that."

"I'm not familiar with his map," said Blunt. "H'm, Charlie Banks, doing time for grand larceny, eh? I'll have to look Charlie up."

"By George!" I exclaimed. "Supposing it was a false mustache? Look here, I haven't told you about that; I thought, of course, I'd only imagined the thing. I thought it was impossible, like all those moons I saw. But, apart from those moons, I seem to have observed things pretty accurately that night. Now when I found this fellow cranking

my car——" And I explained about the wonderful automatic mustache that was capable of intelligent self-movement.

As I finished, an official came in—I learned afterward that he was head of the detective bureau—and nodded familiarly to my companion. "Heard there's been a murder over in Philly," he said at length laconically. "New Yorker by the name of Ashton. Beats hell how business keeps up."

CHAPTER XV

A WEEK'S EVENTS

A WEEK had passed since the tragic death of Ashton, a week that dragged interminably, and which to me was one of the bitterest and most miserable I had ever known. The relief experienced at finding myself innocent of the Red Bank fatality —I had been fully exonerated in the press, thanks to the man Taylor and Mr. Varney—was short-lived, for I had merely exchanged one burden for another. I accounted myself indirectly responsible for the foul murder of one of my best friends, a friend for whom I would have laid down my own life, if need be. I remembered now Blunt's queer expression when I said Ashton would be home in a few days. Little did I think at the time of the tragic manner of that homecoming.

Poor Tommy Ashton and his boast that he was a match for such cowardly enemies! How strange and awful to think that but a few weeks ago he was attending the burial service over what was thought to be my mangled remains, and that now I should be the mourner and he, in truth, the corpse! It was one of the incomprehensible and ironic tragedies of life. How I wished now, when too

late, that I had stuck to my intention of telling him nothing about the Black Company; and yet, looking back on it all, I hardly see how I could have done it. As Blunt said, it seemed to be one of those things that are just bound to happen. I had not wanted to offend Ashton, and even if I had kept silent at the risk of our friendship, in all likelihood the result would have been the same.

"I expected something like this," said Blunt. "I believed him to be in as great peril as you yourself, but I didn't wish to alarm you. I could do very little, for you didn't know his address. I wired Philadelphia headquarters to look him up at all the hotels and keep an eye on him, but it was too late. Of course, there isn't a shred of evidence to show that the Black Company is responsible, but I think we are safe in assuming that. They meant to bag him as well as you. Now, you mustn't take this too hard, or start brooding over it. As I say, it isn't what you told him, but what they took for granted you told him. You were seen with him——"

"Yes, by Frean. And, by Heaven, if he's responsible——"

"Steady now; we don't know that he is, so don't do anything rash if you happen to meet him. You won't for the present, unless you go out of your way, for he has returned to Sea Bright."

Blunt then told me that he had verified what

I had learned about Mr. Fremstad and Joyce. "Another foregone conclusion," he said. "They work through innocent and respectable people. That accident which made Mr. Fremstad give up motoring could have been engineered by Joyce if need be. Anyway, he leaves with the best credentials. Taken with the downfall of Jules, it looks undoubtedly, as you said, as if there had been a carefully thought-out and long-matured plot to plant Joyce with Varney. Jules has disappeared, but we're looking him up to find who helped him off the water wagon in Philadelphia. It was Corby, for all his buttermilk diet, who continued the good work in Sea Bright. That's the report of the operative covering him. Another of my men has taken the place of Williams, the gardener."

"If they had nothing to fear from Mr. Fremstad and Joyce being investigated, the one being innocent and the other having been actually a patient in the Charity Hospital, why was poor Ashton killed?"

"But we don't know what line he was following," replied Blunt. "I think it's fairly obvious that he must have hit on evidence of some kind not connected with Fremstad, or, necessarily, Joyce, which made his removal compulsory. What took him to that low quarter of the town? If we knew all that happened from the time he left his hotel to the finding of his remains in that back alley in Chinatown, we'd know a lot. I believe that Rabbi

Goldmann was put out of the way for the same reason—stumbling on incriminating evidence. But in your friend's case it was no accident; he got what he went after—some of it, anyway—but he wasn't allowed to get away with it."

Mr. Blunt then urged me again to have patience. "Don't think I'm trying to hog this thing; I'm working hand in hand with the police of half a dozen cities. I know you're ready to spend your whole fortune to avenge your friend, but all the money in the world couldn't hurry matters. Criminal investigation isn't what you read about in some books; against an organization like this it isn't a one-man job, but the slow forging of a chain, link by link, by many hands. All that it is possible to do is being done, and you may rest assured of that. Remember that a gun that goes off at half cock seldom hits anything. Finally, the sort of detective that has marvelous bursts of inspiration and can tell from the way your hair is parted what you had for breakfast, has no counterpart in real life. Whatever stories have been told about me, and which may have given you an exaggerated idea of my ability, success never came to me except through hard work and the application of some intelligence. There's no royal road nor short cut in my business, Mr. Lawton, any more than there is in your own or others."

This common-sense talk did me a lot of good, for

I was getting captious, and in the mood for demanding miracles. So I apologized for the impatience I had shown, and asked if there wasn't something I could do to help, aside from spending money hiring other fellows to do the work.

"Yes," said Lisping Jimmie promptly, "it would help a lot if you took a vacation in Timbuktu until this thing's cut and dried. No, I don't mean you're a nuisance; far from it. I mean it would relieve me to know you were out of harm's way. I know you won't go, but I assure you it would be the best and wisest thing to do. You can't take an active hand in the game because you're known."

"I'm in no more danger than, say, you yourself. No, I can't run away. It's not that I'm a hero, but if I'm not able to take an active part I simply have to stick around and see what's doing. I can't help it."

I don't pretend that I found any keen enjoyment in the idea that some one was gunning for me, and that I had only escaped so far by the exercise of vigilance and precaution. When I walked abroad I carried an automatic pistol slung, according to Blunt's advice, in a holster under my left arm beneath my coat.

Drawing it was a matter of a second, but it was quite a different matter whether I could hit anything short of the Woolworth Building, for I hadn't been brought up with firearms. I had misgivings

about the weapon, especially when sticking the clip of cartridges in the handle—queer place to load a gun—and I always made dead sure that the safety catches were on the job. My idea would have been a thick blackthorn, something I could take a good swipe with, and be sure of getting home, but I must admit the pistol gave me quite a martial feeling and desperadolike air.

I was shepherded, too, like any ewe lamb, a novel experience for one who has had a long tussle single-handed with the world. One of the agency's men was on hall service in the Belvedere, while another picked me up and kept me in sight wherever I went.

This last was a little, ferret-eyed person called Nast, who looked like a broken-down old-clothes man; he was a painstaking and conscientious disciple, and as hard to get rid of as a bad name. More than once I tried to shake him, for mere diversion's sake, but he always turned up like a bad penny. I believe he must have been an ex-bill collector or process server.

Of course, my movements were restricted, too; I wasn't to stay out late at night, or go wandering off the beaten track. All this proved very irksome, and I wished another try would be made for my life, if only to justify these measures and help break the monotony.

As the end of the week approached, and nothing

happened, I began to think the enemy had cold feet, and was scared off. This was supported by the news that Frean was back in town. He had taken his old quarters at the Marlborough, while Corby had disappeared. Blunt wasn't telling me everything, however, and I had an idea Corby wasn't so securely hidden as he may have imagined.

I was no nearer solving the key move of the problem—why Joyce had been "planted" with Mr. Varney. The latter's past had been thoroughly raked over, and not a solitary fact was unearthed that would go to show him connected in any way with the Black Company. Nor, according to medical authority, could the symptoms of Addison's disease be approximated by the administration of any known poison. Thus another of my theories went by the board.

Meanwhile I had sent Mr. Varney a check, amounting to the three weeks' wages paid me, and a formal note thanking him for helping to establish my alibi regarding the Red Bank affair. He had not appeared in New York, under the plea of ill health, but had made a deposition as to the hour he had met and talked with me at the crossroads. The check which I sent was returned promptly with the indorsement, in his neat, crabbed handwriting: "The laborer is worthy of his hire." This at least showed less venom toward me, and I began to hope I might eventually reach a better

understanding with him, but I knew it would be fatal to try to rush matters. Only by the future could I wipe out the past unworthy six months and show I had ambition to be something more than a dissolute moneyed loafer.

I was working hard with the plans of the engineering school, and the other projects Mr. Hannay and I had mapped out, while I was considering an offer made by my old employers, Cable & Co., to come back as a working partner. So I was kept busy.

If I have said nothing further about the Demon, it must not be supposed that he did not trouble me any longer, that my victory was sweeping and lightly achieved, or that I considered it absolutely final.

By that I mean I could only consider it final when, through the process of time and nature, the morbid craving left me. An inheritance such as mine is not killed instantly by all the poignant lessons, all the vows and good resolutions in the world. It is a matter of daily, hourly battling, of fierce, grueling conflict, of slow but inexorable wearing down. Often, when the long day was done, I breathed a silent prayer that it found me unashamed.

If I saw little progress in other directions, the end of the week at least cleared up the mystery about the man who had stolen my car. It was

proved beyond all possible doubt that he was the "Charlie" Banks whose picture had caught my attention in the rogues' gallery. It was shown by the Bertillon record that his left hand bore the deformity I had mentioned to Blunt. He was the man the nurse at the hospital had told me about; he had been serving a long sentence in Moyamensing and had escaped the night of Joyce's assault.

"It simply shows how a case may be complicated by the entrance of outside factors," said Blunt. "This fellow had nothing to do with the organization we're after. He robbed Joyce and you simply to help his get-away, for he had no money, and needed a change of clothes. That mustache was a fake, as you suggested, and if he hadn't been smashed to pulp that fact would have been discovered."

CHAPTER XVI

SOME OLD ACQUAINTANCES

I HAD dropped most of the old crowd—rather, they dropped me, not approving of my new mode of life—but that evening, Saturday, I dined with Roupell at Sherry's. It was one of those invitations, long standing, you can't avoid without giving serious offense, and I had nothing against the jovial Falstaff. Blunt's remark that he might be connected with the Black Company was simply a haphazard one, for all my acquaintances might be open to the same suspicion, and I had thought little more about it.

"What!" he exclaimed, visibly affected, when I turned down his offer of a drink. "This is a staggering blow. Come, surely you're not going to compel me to drink alone? Only one glass, just to be sociable."

"Not one drop," I said, though every fiber of me was crying out in protest. It was my first big temptation, and I set my teeth to meet it.

"You don't mean you've gone temperance?" he asked incredulously. "I heard a tale to that effect, but couldn't believe it. Is it because of that Red Bank affair? My dear man, a miss is as good as

a mile. Why do penance for something never committed?"

"No credit to me that it wasn't. I can never forget what might and, by all odds, should have happened. No, I won't take anything, thank you, and that's final."

So, still arguing and protesting, he consumed his own with such slow and evident relish that I could have cracked him over the head. "Sure you won't have a little?" he kept saying every once in a while; and then he would squint at his glass against the light and smack his lips.

"If I come through this," I thought, clenching my hands under the table, "I can come through anything."

"Awfully tragic about poor Ashton," he remarked presently, sighing windily. "Haven't the police done anything yet? Ah, these 'business' trips! But, then, boys will be boys."

"You're entirely wrong if you think he was on the loose," I said hotly. "I know that some of the papers even went so far as to hint at opium smoking, but any one who knew Tommy Ashton at all——"

"But consider the circumstances, Lawton. What else took him to Chinatown?"

"He must have had business there."

"What kind? Come now, of course it won't

go any farther, but between ourselves we may as well admit—eh?"

I think it was a sudden and transient gleam in his cushioned eyes, a mere hint of watchful suspicion so startlingly different from his perennial jovial twinkle, that acted on me like a douche of ice water and stilled my too ready tongue. Perhaps it was only a trick of the light, but, anyway, I found myself regarding Howard Roupell with a new interest, while suddenly mindful of Blunt's remarks about superfluous flesh and malefactors.

For all its indulgent lines, the man's face was powerful in a sense, and I wondered if there was a reverse side to the jovial mask—if mask it were. On the other hand, he might be as innocent and harmless as I had hitherto believed, with no ulterior motive in urging me to drink, or in his talk about Ashton. The knowledge that a hidden and ubiquitous enemy was gunning for me was having its inevitable effect, and I was becoming suspicious of every one.

The entrance of Arnold Frean at this point changed the conversation.

"Hello," said Roupell, "there's that young scallawag. Since his father chucked him out he's more affluent than ever. Wonder where he gets it? Touting, I suppose. Hope he doesn't see us. You know, I'm no Puritan, Lawton, but, between you

and me, that's one fellow I never could stomach. There isn't a straight hair in his head."

Being totally bald himself, Roupell never could have this criticism passed on him. I refused to sit in judgment; and Frean, catching sight of us, strolled over. It was our first meeting since that night in the Admiral and, thinking of poor Ashton, my impulse now was to give Arnold Frean a bit of all that was coming to him. If he had not actually plotted or participated in Ashton's death, he was at least an associate of those who had. But mindful of Blunt's emphatic request, and that a hasty or ill-judged action of mine might ruin far-reaching plans of which I knew nothing, I forced myself to meet Frean with composure, though I could assume no show of cordiality. Roupell's greeting was also chilly, but Frean was neither discouraged nor embarrassed. It took a lot to shake his high opinion of himself.

"Awful crush to-night," he said. "May I butt in here? Thanks!" And he sat down without waiting for an assent. I thought he wasn't looking particularly well; his face was a bit drawn. He would take nothing but mineral water.

"What!" exclaimed Roupell, as if startled out of his dignity and aloofness. "What's the world coming to! You and Lawton both—two in one night! This is an awful shock. Have the two of you fallen in love?"

A faint color tinged Frean's cheek, while I was uncomfortably aware that my own countenance wasn't as impassive as I might have wished.

"Aha, that's it!" exclaimed Roupell, giving his loud, jovial laugh. "Nothing but the ladies—that is, some of 'em—could produce this tremendous catastrophe. Sworn off, eh? Till after the honeymoon, of course. Who are the fortunate fair? Let us hope for the plural, that it isn't a case of the old unhappy triangle. I'm afraid, Frean, you wouldn't stand much of a chance against Lawton—I mean, the reformed article. Consider his beauty and purse, a sort of Apollo-Midas, going in strong for temperance and charity."

"When I think of marrying, Roupell, I'll let you know first—it would be the simplest way of sending out announcements," yawned Frean. "If I'm not drinking, it's on account of my liver, not my heart." But I saw that Roupell's words had gone home, for Frean glowered at me for a moment, and I sensed what Blunt would have called "the entrance of an outside complicating factor." He was in love, or near it, with Brenda Gelette.

"You got off mighty lucky from that Red Bank mess," he sneered presently. "Nothing like being rich. How much did it cost you?"

"More, perhaps, than you would care to pay—simply the truth."

"You call me a liar?" he cried.

"Here! Remember where you are," exclaimed Roupell. "This is no place to settle differences."

"I haven't called you anything," I said to Frean, "but you're at liberty to draw your own inference. If you think I paid any hush money or tried to square the case, you're mistaken. My innocence was established on the facts."

"Oh, of course," he sneered. "You can establish anything if you're rich enough; and that tale about your car being stolen was awfully thin."

"Well, don't worry about it," I said, pushing back my chair and determined to keep my temper. "Sorry, Roupell, but I have to cut along."

"Hold on," said Frean. "You've given me the lie, Lawton, and I demand satisfaction. I'll fight you with anything you please, and I know where we can go. You can bring along Roupell here to see fair play."

"I say, that's hardly in my line, you know," protested Roupell, in some distress. "Still, Lawton, I'll be happy to oblige. I think a lesson in manners wouldn't do some one any harm."

"Thanks, but I'm not in the business," I replied. "Don't be an ass, Frean, but go home and cool your head. If you're not drunk, you ought to be."

"You're a rank coward!"

"Perhaps I am," I agreed. "Anyway, I refuse to quarrel about it." And I left the room, marveling somewhat at my new-found self-control.

In the cloakroom Roupell said: "That fellow needs a good scragging, and you ought to give it to him, Lawton. The Lord knows I'm a man of peace, but you can't lie down under that insult. Take him up and finish it to-night. I'll second you. If you don't, he'll brand you all over town." Falstaff had grown very warlike, perhaps, like his prototype, because some one else would be doing the actual fighting, and when I signified utter indifference about the branding process and refused absolutely to do any "scragging," he was visibly affected and seemed quite put out.

As I walked the few blocks to the Belvedere, closely trailed by Nast, I decided that on the following Monday, when I next saw Blunt, I would direct his attention to Howard Roupell.

The next afternoon, while strolling aimlessly down the Avenue, one of the Sunday four o'clock throng, I met Brenda Gelette. Indeed, we actually collided as I turned the corner of the Waldorf. I had no idea she was in town, and it was not until I had doffed my straw bonnet and was voicing the conventional apology that I recognized her. We stared at each other for a moment, and I saw the angry color mounting to her cheek.

"Oh, how do—er—you do, Miss Gelette?" I finished lamely.

"I—er—do very well, thank you, Mr. Lawton," she mimicked acidly, and marched past me toward

my old friend, the maroon de luxe, standing at the curb. Joyce was at the wheel.

Cheered greatly by not receiving the cut direct, I turned and overtook her in a stride. "May I have a word with you, please?"

"No, you may not," she said, looking accurately through the brim of my hat. "I don't talk with strangers."

"That's why I want the privilege of introducing myself."

"I don't desire your acquaintance, thank you."

"I'm not offering it. I merely wish the opportunity of apologizing and explaining some past events."

"They are beyond explaining."

"Even the worst criminal is permitted to be heard in his own defense."

Already some curious passing glances had been turned on us, and she flushed and bit her lip. "You're taking an unfair advantage of me," she protested. "Must I call for help?"

"Really I don't need any."

"I shall call a policeman if you don't stop annoying me."

"It will take the whole force to get rid of me. In the words of Ruth—I think it was Ruth—'Whither thou goest——' I insist on being heard. You cannot be less generous than—well, lots of people."

"At least I didn't think you could be a coward and bully—— Oh, very well; anything to save a street scene." And she marched toward the car, head erect and cheeks crimson.

"Where to?" I asked, bowing her in.

She sank back in a corner and smiled wickedly. "Oh, that's entirely for you to say. I have absolutely nothing to do with it."

"Claremont," I said to Joyce, "and go as slow as you like."

The car moved off, and I had a fleeting glimpse of the faithful Nast, supporting a lamp-post in his Sunday best, looking unutterable reproaches. I had slipped him for once.

Miss Gelette had lost her momentary calm, and was once again indignant. "How dare you!" she exclaimed. "If you think I'm going to dine with you at the Claremont——"

"It's not compulsory. There is music and a beautiful view."

"I'm not going there at all!"

"But you are; you said it was for me to decide."

"I am not!"

The car continued up the Avenue. Miss Gelette drummed her heels. "I am not!" she repeated. "Besides, I can't leave my uncle for so long. Stop the car at once!"

I did not stop it.

"Oh, very well," she said. "You will answer

for this—this outrage. You refuse to stop, you prevent me by main force from communicating with Joyce——"

"I haven't."

"Well, you will; I know you will."

"Certainly. I am absolutely reckless. It wouldn't do you any good to try the speaking tube, anyway. Joyce's morality has been undermined; he has been heavily bribed."

"How exciting!" she murmured. "Abducted by an ex-chauffeur, and what a lovely afternoon it is." She leaned back and eyed the gay, moving panorama of the sunlit Avenue through the open windows. Her mood had changed; she was resigned. I could have asked no better confessional than the town car; Joyce was completely shut off, and we were alone.

"Well," she said at length, "you may begin and have it over with. Or haven't you rehearsed sufficiently?"

"I was wondering where to start——"

"I'm not surprised you find some difficulty."

"I suppose I'd better begin by saying how much I appreciate what your uncle did for me! If he hadn't corroborated my statement—and I'm sure he was entitled——"

"He could do nothing less, not through any veneration for you, but because he is not in the habit

of perjuring himself. He was asked for the truth and he told it—quite unlike some people."

"Indeed, yes. It is remarkable how some people simply cannot tell the truth."

"It is," she said, looking at me.

"Of course there are occasions when one must prevaricate; one is forced into deception. There is an excuse——"

"There was absolutely no excuse for your deception, and you needn't try to make one up!" she interrupted violently. "Oh, yes, it was one of your well-known jokes! Something to laugh over later with your dissolute friends. Yes, you even admitted to Joyce it was the result of a drunken wager! Oh, the shame of it! I wonder how you can sit there and laugh——"

"But I'm not laughing."

"You are!"

"Then my face isn't telling the truth."

"I'm not surprised."

"Really, I'm not laughing. Far from it. I tell you I never felt more solemn or full of weighty reproaches in my life. In the first place I ask you to consider my inheritance. Understand that I'm not trying to shelter myself behind that; but I overheard you say one day something to Mr. Varney regarding it which showed you could understand and, perhaps, sympathize a little. I ask for that understanding now."

"I think you have always had it." Her eyes softened, but she added uncompromisingly: "Well, does that explain and excuse everything?"

"No, I didn't mean that it should. I'm merely leading up to what lay behind that wager with Mr. Hewitt. On his part it was not unworthy. It was an effort at my reformation, and, when I was in a position to realize it, I determined to profit by it. I assure you it meant a great deal more than the winning of a wager; it meant the winning back of my manhood and self-respect. It meant the battle of my life, and, if I lost it, Peter Lawton would remain 'dead' for all time. My surroundings helped me greatly; I was working once more for my living, spending only what I earned, and I was cut off from friends I could well afford to do without. Nor can I estimate your unconscious influence and that of Mr. Varney. The promise I gave you that day was not given in jest, something to laugh over later with my friends. It meant the turning point in my life, the life of the previous six months. I have kept that promise faithfully, and shall do so to the end, God helping me. To sum up, consider a man fighting for his soul, and therefore throwing everything into the scale."

She turned away suddenly and looked out of the window. "I—I think you might have told me," she said over her shoulder.

As I had promised Blunt to say nothing to any

one about the Black Company, I had to leave all reference to it out of my present argument. "How could I tell you?" I replied. "You know it could only have meant my instant dismissal. I knew your uncle hated my people, but I didn't know the reason. I assure you, also, I was ignorant of the Red Bank matter. That had absolutely nothing to do with my maintaining the rôle of Joyce."

"To do my uncle and me justice, we never thought it had," she said. "We knew, though Mr. Frean didn't, that you couldn't have been in Red Bank at that hour, considering the hour we met you at the crossroads. And if there had been any trouble proving your innocence, we would have offered our evidence unasked. Resentment or animosity never obscured my uncle's sense of justice. And I will say I never actually believed you were aware of the family history which caused that resentment and animosity. I myself knew nothing about it till my uncle told me the other day. Do you know now?"

I replied that Mr. Hannay had informed me. "As I have enough sins of my own to answer for," I added, "I ask not to be blamed too much for what my parents may have done. To put it baldly, they jilted Mr. Varney and your mother, and none too delicately either. I quite understand why Mr. Varney and you, too, for that matter, should have a particular aversion for me."

The car had turned into Seventy-second Street from Broadway, and we were speeding up the Drive.

"Then you credit me with a very narrow mind. There is excuse for my uncle; he was affected immediately and has brooded over it. If I were in his place I would have probably taken it the same way—if I didn't kill your father, which would be more to my notion. On the other hand, if I loved like your parents and was in the same situation, I should very likely follow their example. We don't know how we may act under certain circumstances, so what's the good of trying to judge others? No, that ancient family history had no part in my 'particular aversion' for you, nor could it. I only thought you treated me personally pretty shabbily—and I'm not at all sure yet that you didn't.

"Of course," she went on, before I could reply, "it is very flattering to think I was of any assistance at all in the terrible struggle you were having. And I quite realize now the nature of that struggle, all you suffered——"

We had reached the Claremont, and she arose to enter a final protest. But a few minutes later we were seated at a table in a quiet corner.

"Well, cerainly this is the last thing I expected!" she exclaimed. "You are a singularly overbearing person, Mr. Lawton."

CHAPTER XVII

AN INTERRUPTED DIALOGUE

VERY soon I learned that Mr. Varney and she were stopping at the Waldorf. They had come up the previous day on "business," which included a visit to a famous specialist, and she had been on the way to call on friends when I abducted her.

"And what does the famous specialist say?"

For answer she made a hopeless gesture and her mouth drooped.

"I have a great attachment for that uncle of yours," I said. "Is there any chance of squaring things with him? I rely on you putting in a good word for me."

"Do you really? Your confidence is amazing. It always was. Have you seen Mr. Frean lately?" she added abruptly.

"Yes, last night."

"You and he aren't particularly good friends, are you?"

"Well, I suppose I should feel a bit resentful for his exposing me."

"Is that the only reason?"

"I wasn't aware we were actual enemies."

She made an impatient gesture. "Indeed! I suppose you call that being true to your idiotic man's sense of honor—what you call playing the game? It doesn't do to say to a woman a derogatory word about a man behind his back, no matter how he may deserve it. You know very well that Mr. Frean has the making of an excellent scoundrel."

"You astonish me."

"No, but I shall; I overheard everything you and Mr. Frean said that day on the veranda. Yes, I did."

I looked appropriately astonished; indeed I was, very much so. I had never imagined she thought Frean a potential scoundrel; certainly she had disguised her feelings very well.

"How did you happen to overhear us?" I asked.

"Well, I thought you might have the grace to apologize, and so I came down to the drawing-room——"

"I wanted to apologize; I came to the house for that purpose. I wanted to see you, and then, when I met Frean and he told me about that Red Bank business, that you and your uncle believed me guilty, of course, and that I'd been hiding —well, I hadn't the nerve."

"It is your turn to astonish me," she said. "I thought you had nerve enough for anything—and

I'm not at all sure you haven't. I haven't found you lacking in that commodity."

"There is nerve and nerve. But I don't see how you could have overheard all our conversation unless you listened deliberately."

"Of course I listened deliberately," she said, unabashed. "The windows were open and I listened for all I was worth. It wasn't one of those stage conventions, where one is caught and is forced to eavesdrop—or pretend that one is forced. I'm making no bones about it, and I'd do it again if I had the chance."

"I am pained and shocked beyond words."

"So was I. To think you knew all the time, and never told me! We had no idea Mr. Frean was guilty of such things, but my uncle has proved their truth."

Perhaps this, then, accounted for Frean's sudden return to town, and not the fact of my engaging the services of the Blunt Agency. No doubt he believed I had gone to Varney with the facts of his evil career, done as I had threatened.

"So it was Mr. Frean," pursued my companion, "who induced you to take your first drink, well knowing your inheritance?"

"I wasn't a child. He couldn't have induced me if I hadn't let him."

"Oh, I quite realize you don't blame him in the least. You're a very strong person, and quite able

to stand alone, aren't you? But I'm curious to know what particular incident made him your enemy in the first place."

"Oh, we fell out over some trivial thing, I forget what."

"No, you don't, but you've made up your mind not to tell me. Very well, I shan't press you. Only, I think it's perfectly stupid of you to champion him. Tell me, supposing he hadn't recognized you, and Joyce hadn't turned up, how long would you have kept up the fraud on us? Had you any reason for remaining so long?"

"I should say I had; the best reason in the world."

"Indeed. What was it?"

"I was in love."

"O-o-h. With whom, may I ask? The cook?"

"No. I'll give you three guesses."

"Then it must have been the upper housemaid."

"No, it mustn't; nor the lower, either. Marvelous to relate, it was yourself."

"Mr. Lawton!"

"Miss Gelette."

"You—you—I——"

"You needn't try to seem astonished. You know perfectly well how things are with me, that I crashed head over heels in love with you from the first day I saw you. You know that; you've known it——"

"I know nothing of the kind!" she exclaimed, growing crimson. "This—this is ridiculous, Mr. Lawton! I cannot listen——"

"I have merely answered your question, and I see no harm in the simple statement of an obvious truth. The fact that I can never marry you makes it all the simpler."

"H-have I asked you to marry me?" she demanded, almost choking with anger, astonishment, and exasperation. "This is too much!" She pushed back her chair and arose.

"If you will only let me explain——" I began.

"I am going home," she said icily, "and I'm going *alone*."

But she wasn't. When she got into the car she found me on the seat opposite.

"To resume," I said, "I cannot see why the simple fact——"

"There is a great deal you cannot see. It appears to be a constitutional defect. Would you mind saying nothing further? It would make your forced presence less intolerable."

Having agreed to silence, I said: "But we were getting along so splendidly, and then this happened suddenly and all over nothing. I'm sure I can't help loving you; that is something beyond my control. And is there any harm in saying what I feel? I remember acutely what your uncle said about my father. I agree with him. A man with

my inheritance has no business marrying—not, as your uncle said, if he loves the girl better than himself. That is my position."

"Your heroism and self-sacrifice are to be profoundly admired, Mr. Lawton, and you take it all, this great tragedy, with such delightful cheerfulness. But then, you are a philosopher."

"You know perfectly well that the greatest tragedies must be spoken of lightly. If I didn't speak with cheerfulness, I couldn't speak at all."

"What a pity, then, there is such a thing as cheerfulness! May I call your attention to the fact that this is the second time you have said: 'You know perfectly well——' I object to having knowledge of certain facts imputed to me. I know what I know and what I don't know, and no one knows better. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly. You mean you know I don't know what you know you know."

"Exactly. So at no time was I aware of your feelings toward me, nor do I know how one must speak about tragedies—though I should say you were the very worst of tragedians. Also, your explanation and apology—if you meant it as such—is hardly satisfying. The fact that you cannot marry isn't such a tremendous fact of world-wide importance, nor the cause of public lamentation, as you appear to think it. Moreover, it hardly gives you the right to go round telling people that you

love them, does it? Forgive me, then, if I feel a trifle bored."

It was here that, as if to relieve her boredom, there came a loud report, the car stopped with a jerk, and Joyce informed us respectfully that we had a blow-out.

We found ourselves on a dark and lonely road, which, I learned later, was up near Washington Heights, between the river and Broadway; a street recently cut through, and in which building operations were in progress.

"Is this the way home from the Claremont to the Waldorf?" I demanded of Joyce. "Do you really think so, even if you do come from Philadelphia?"

"You said first off you was in no hurry, sir, and I thought I'd be doing you a service if I went a bit out of my way going home," he remarked, in a confidential aside. "I can be a longish time over this job, sir, if you and Miss Gelette was to take a little walk. I've done a bit of sweetheartin' myself, sir."

"Have you? You're very obliging, Joyce, but we won't be taking any little walk. You get that blow-out fixed at once; I've been a chauffeur, remember, and I know just how long it should take. If there's any slacking, I guarantee to speed you up."

Murmuring something about the ingratitude of certain people he took off his coat and went to

the tool chest; and then out of the darkness on my right there came three reports that were blow-outs of another order, the bullets droning past like angry hornets, and one nicking me on the ear.

I scuttled out of the circle of light in which I had been standing, and, drawing my trusty weapon, charged valiantly for the spot whence came the flashes. But somehow I find it awfully hard to be a hero, though it looks so dead easy when, say, Douglas Fairbanks gets into action. I admire Douglas; he is the original little cleaner-up of trouble and nothing ever goes wrong with his game. He never foozles or duffs a shot and, had he been in my place, he would have smoked out those varlets in ambush—aye, even had they been a hundred in number—and killed them slowly and painfully and most satisfactorily. Darkness is nothing to him, nor are ten-foot fences.

Unfortunately I didn't see the fence until I couldn't help it, until, in fact, I'd crashed into it headfirst, bounced off buoyantly and landed in a heap of muck. Then I knew it was there. This, and a few stars, was all I did see or find, though I hunted round promiscuously. But presently I heard something else—the chug of a motor from the side street across the vacant lot. The birds had flown, so I returned my automatic to its swinging hammock under my left arm, and retired in good

order to the car, covered not with glory but with refuse. Somehow it always happens thus with me.

When I got back to the car Joyce was hiding manfully behind it while Brenda Gelette, womanishly, was out scouting round to see what was up. While I was trying to explain, a policeman broke into the family circle and demanded anxiously if we thought it was the Fourth of July.

"It wasn't you, sir, they was after," said Joyce, as I explained the fireworks. "It was me. You remember we was standing in the light looking at the forward wheels; and then I dodged round to the tool chest. That move saved my life, for it was me they was aiming at."

"Of course, I know that," I replied, smiling sweetly at him. "I haven't an enemy in the world."

"And I have," he sighed. "This ain't the first time I've been potted at, not by a long shot."

To the policeman he told a moving story of an Italian whom he had crossed in some love affair in the Quaker City. Joyce was clearly a man of parts, for he related the tale circumstantially and well, while he looked at me as much as to say: "I told you, sir, I'd done a bit of sweetheartin'." It gratified him, too, when the conscientious policeman laboriously wrote down the mythical Italian's name, his description, and former address.

The bluecoat was no Sherlock Holmes, but he seemed to think it rather remarkable that the would-

be assassin should have known beforehand our homeward route, and that our tire should happen to explode conveniently near where he was hiding in ambush. Of course, I had remarked these little oddities myself, but I forebore comment. I hate to criticize a good story, such as Joyce's.

When at length we resumed our journey, Brenda Gelette manifested a flattering interest in my damaged ear, after which we hastened to return to our former footing.

"It was perfectly stupid of you to act as you did," she said quite angrily. "There's a difference between bravery and mere folly. The idea of rushing like that at a hidden enemy who has a loaded revolver! It's a wonder you weren't riddled like a sieve. I hate people who are always showing off."

"My action was based on sound strategy and tactics, which any properly qualified military authority will admit," I said injuredly. "Out of the light from the car I was on equal terms with the enemy; we were both in the dark. Added to which I was too frightened to really know which way I was running. And, finally, I was in no danger, for the enemy wasn't mine, but Joyce's."

"He wasn't Joyce's. I saw what happened. Joyce had stepped safely to the opposite side of the car, leaving you alone in the light, before those shots were fired. At that short distance there could be

no mistaking you for him. Joyce may have a hundred jealous Italians after him, but those bullets were meant for you, and it was only by a miracle you escaped. And if you 'haven't an enemy in the world,' why do you carry a pistol? Yes, you needn't deny it; I saw you draw it as you ran, and it's there at this minute under your coat. I suppose you carry it merely for ornament?"

"Well, something like that," I admitted. "You see I come of a warlike family—my grandfather beat the big drum in the Greenwich Village fencibles—and I never feel contented unless carrying a deadly weapon of some kind. It's in the blood, so to speak; I cannot help the martial strain. A lethal weapon is, to me, what a—well, a walking stick is to the average man. You needn't be afraid of this weapon; in my hands——"

"I'm not afraid in the least—except that you'll blow your eye out if you keep handling it like that. I know more about such things than you do; I've fired one many a time. I don't believe you know a thing about it."

"On the contrary I am a qualified master-of-arms. I took a thorough correspondence course. To demonstrate, you see the peculiarity about this instrument is that you load it in the handle. I'll show you; you see—why, drat it——" For there wasn't a blessed cartridge in the magazine.

"I knew it," said Miss Gelette icily, for some reason more angry than ever. "You poor idiot!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I say you poor idiot! It wasn't even loaded. And you rushed after those men—oh, my goodness me!"

"One can't account for such things," I said. "The beauty of this instrument is that one can't see when it is loaded. It is all Watkins' fault and I must speak to him about it. What's the use of having a valet if he can't attend to such things? It's really not the fault of this weapon; I assure you it's a very deadly one if somebody only happens to remember to load it."

"You are absolutely hopeless—in every way," she said viciously. "I hate you!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I hate you! I never knew I could hate anybody as I do you. But, of course, your affairs are your own, and I'm quite sure it's less than nothing to me if you happen to be killed a dozen times a day by all the hidden enemies in the world."

"That," I said, "would be manifestly impossible. The only hidden enemy that has me thinking of nights is one whom you know; they call him John Barleycorn, and some day, when I'm absolutely certain I have him down for the count——" But I was fated this evening to have all my best speeches

interrupted. We had reached the Waldorf, and I had to get out.

"I am indebted to you for this afternoon and evening," I opened again on the steps of the ladies' entrance. "They have been quite the happiest in a lonely and worthless beggar's life. I took them by force, and have still to pay for them; but no price could come too high. Please believe I have never meant to offend you in any way, and that your lightest wish is my command. I ask you to believe, also, that many a light word comes from a heavy heart."

"You got that out of a book," she said.

"I didn't," I protested.

"And you really mean," she added inexorably, "that many a heavy word comes from a light head." She said this with a laugh, but, to my astonishment, I saw that she had been crying. Whereupon all my good resolutions went overboard.

"Brenda!" I cried. "My dear little girl——" And, starting forward impulsively, I almost fell into the arms of a portly dowager who, leading a gay female parade, had swept into the vestibule. Brenda was hopelessly lost in the shuffle, and the dowager, properly objecting to being addressed by a total stranger as "my dear little girl," gave me a basilisk stare and suggested loudly to her retinue that "the man must be drunk."

CHAPTER XVIII

FURTHER DISCOVERIES

IT was Watkins' night out and when I got home, shepherded by the ridiculous Nast, I was thinking more of Brenda Gelette than of the Black Company, which was not to be wondered at. Indeed I was thinking of her to the exclusion of all else; thus, you may say, I was ripe for the experience that befell me. And yet even if my mind hadn't been preoccupied I never would have suspected that here in my own stronghold, guarded inwardly by the faithful and efficient Watkins, and outwardly by Blunt's hirelings——

However, to proceed, I walked into the parlor, like the historic fly, switched on the light, and found a spider waiting for me in the person of Arnold Frean, and quite a venomous spider he now appeared. He was looking worse than he had the previous night, there was a febrile fire in his sunken eyes, and his face was drawn and haggard. He sat behind a table facing the door by which I had entered; his right elbow rested on that table, and in his hand rested a veritable young cannon, its black white-rimmed eye directed accurately at the middle button of my sack coat. I hate to get hit in a

place like that and so I stood promptly at attention. A forty-five bullet wouldn't agree with what I had had at the Claremont; I could visualize it plowing through the menu and creating quite a disturbance.

"Put that beastly thing away, Frean," I said. "It might go off."

"It might," he agreed, finger on trigger.

Now I have heard and read a great deal about the human eye; so have you. You must have. You know how it has the power to soothe the savage breast—or is it music that does that? But you know what I mean; it has the power to transform the most voracious lions into lambs, the most enthusiastic murderer into a puling philanthropist. All the best writers are agreed on that; it has been done over and over again. You have heard also of the will to win and the power of mind over matter. Decidedly I had the will to live and, summoning all my great mental and spiritual powers I looked at Frean and commanded him again to demobilize. Nothing doing; there was something wrong somewhere. Perhaps it was because Frean wouldn't let me look him in the eye; at least his eye refused to be inveigled from that middle button. It seemed to fascinate him.

"At least," I said, "turn it a bit up or down. In the words of the martyred Barbara—I forget if they really did kill her; they should have, for I've had to learn that poem—shoot if you must but spare

your country's victuals. I paid fifteen dollars for a recent dinner. Also, my friend, consider the carpet. Cleanliness is next to godliness."

To my great relief he gave a sickly sort of smile and then pocketed the weapon. "You've nerve, Lawton; I'll say that for you. But I was only fooling, showing you what I could have done. I never meant to shoot you."

Now I was very angry for I'd been properly frightened. "I don't care for that sort of fooling," I said, "and I believe I can see a joke as quick as anybody. If you ever try anything like that on me again—how the Harry did you get in here?"

He shrugged. "Oh, I knew it was Watkins' night off and I happened to have a key."

"Happened? People don't happen to have keys that fit these doors. What did you come for? Look here, if you've come to resume last night's affair, it's a mere waste of time. I refuse to quarrel with you seriously. You know I've licked you once, and that, no matter how you may deserve it, I can't go on beating you up. There's no glory in it. Therefore, knowing that, it doesn't show much spirit on your part——"

"I'm not here for that," he said jerkily, with twitching lips. "I—I've something to say to you, something that no one else must hear. It's as much as my life's worth. You're right; I didn't happen

to have a key; one was made specially and given to me."

I sat down and looked at him; in spite of Ashton's tragic death I still felt a certain pity for Frean. Perhaps "understanding" is a better word. Like myself, he had taken the wrong turning in life's highway, a far more dangerous one than that which I had trod for a time, and he had gone on blundering into the abyss. Unlike myself, early poverty had never fostered the best in him.

"What exactly is the idea?" I said.

"I was sent here to kill you, Lawton," he said slowly, pausing between each word, while he fixed his somber eyes on me. "You will do me justice to admit that I could have done so easily. I could have shot you down like a dog——"

"And been caught and sent to the chair for it."

"Perhaps, but that isn't the point. I could have done it and I didn't. I saved your life, and now I ask you to save mine."

"I'd like to, Frean, but it takes two to do that. You've been throwing your life away, living——"

"I don't mean that. I'm a marked man now; they'll kill me!"

"My dear fellow——"

He broke in upon me passionately, almost hysterically. "You must listen to me! You must believe all I say! You must take things seriously for once. You're a marked man, Lawton, and now,

so am I! So am I! They'll kill me for betraying them. They'll kill us both as they killed poor Ashton! They're devils, I tell you; they'll stop at nothing! That fiend, Corby, suspects me. He has all along. I've seen it in his bloodless face and dead eyes. He says nothing, but he knows. He's like a white snake, waiting to strike! I—I can't bear the strain any longer. I know you think I'm crazy—God knows I soon will be!"

He covered his face with his hands and cowered back in the chair, the picture of an utterly broken and abject spirit. It is a terrible picture, one you can never forget.

I got him to swallow some whisky, speaking to him as I would to a child. "You're absolutely safe here," I repeated, "and you don't have to convince me of your sanity. I've heard of the Black Company."

At the words he dropped the glass with a crash, started up, and stared at me wildly, terrified and astonished. "You—you've heard of it? How?"

"Never mind that now. I know you're a member. Pull yourself together and tell me all about it. I'm not your enemy, Frean, and never was."

"N-no, but I was yours," he said brokenly. "I hated you, Lawton. I hated you for catching me at the card sharping and because you'd always been too decent to me. I got you to drink, hoping you'd go the way of all your folks. I hated you—and

yet I've come to you to-night, feeling that you're the only man who could or would help me, the only man I could rely on. Queer, isn't it? I don't pretend to understand it, but it's so."

"Don't try to understand it," I said. "Now I want to ask you one question; did you know beforehand anything about what was going to happen to Tommy Ashton?"

"As God is my judge, I knew nothing about it! I don't know yet. I've only suspicions."

"I couldn't bring myself to think you did, Frean—a man who'd been to college with you and had done his best to help you. And yet you saw us together at the Admiral that night. What brought you there?"

"To see Roupell. I didn't know you and Ashton were there until I walked into the grill. Roupell asked me to meet him there; he phoned me. No, I never even knew that Ashton was going to Philadelphia that night. I swear it, Lawton."

"Then I'll help you," I said. "I'll help you to the last cent and the last kick in me. I've a bone to pick with these jovial clubmates of yours, and we can help each other a lot. This visit of yours hasn't surprised me so awfully much; I knew last month the society suspected you, that they weren't sure of you, and I saw last night signs of you cracking under the strain. You've got the right

line on Corby; he was detailed to watch you—and so was I."

"Y-you?" His face went livid, and he made a sudden dive for the revolver.

I swept it aside and shoved him back in the chair. "Keep your hair on, Frean. I'm not a member of the society, and you haven't fallen into any trap."

"You gave me an awful turn," he gasped, mopping his face. "You see, I don't know half the members. What do you mean, then?"

"I'll explain later. First, I want to hear all you know about this crew. You can trust me absolutely. How did you get in with them?"

"I hardly know myself," he said despondently, and with a dazed expression. "The past few months have been a nightmare. It was all my own fault, of course. You know the pace I was going. Well, I needed money badly, and got into the clutches of Howard Roupell. You don't know the real Roupell, Lawton." He glanced about him with the old hunted look and instinctively lowered his voice.

"I'm not sure that I don't," I said. "Isn't he a member?"

"Yes, though I don't know how you guessed it. It was he who put me up to the twenty-thousand-dollar stock job for which my father chucked me out. If I hadn't bungled it a bit, the thing might never have been discovered. Roupell got most of the profit, or, rather, it went to the general funds

of the Black Company. Of course, I haven't a shred of evidence, the kind that would make good in a court of law, to prove his part in it. They're too clever for that. Anyway, if I had tried to squeal, they'd have finished me."

"Just what a sort of a society is it?"

"It's a criminal organization or company, run on business lines. I'm not a full-fledged member, for six months have to pass before you're really admitted. In other words, you're under supervision for that length of time. Roupell assured me they only shaved the law. I—I had no idea of the organization's true nature until it was too late. I swear I hadn't."

"Why do they use the names of the chess pieces and the algebraic notation? Yes, I know about that."

"I don't really know, but Roupell told me they took the name of the Black Company because life was a chess game, and they were the Black pieces because they were always on the defensive. The White pieces, representing the law and organized society, were always attacking them. They're anarchists, but without the anarchist's sacrifice of self, or his folly. They are foes of the State and Church, but they don't aim at any Utopia. They aim merely to secure the riches which they claim the world owes them. Trusts are the order of the day, and this is simply a sort of criminal trust. Of course, I haven't been admitted to their full

confidence, or all their secrets, but I believe they've regular meetings at the Philadelphia headquarters, when they all appear dressed to represent chessmen. I'm not eligible to attend such meetings, and I don't know where the place is."

Frean then verified Blunt's surmise: that a pawn was attached to every capital piece, and that these pawns were promoted, according to service rendered, until they became capital pieces in turn, that they did all the actual dangerous work, and were sacrificed ruthlessly at the first sign of treachery. The earnings of all members were pooled, and every one drew a percentage according to his standing in the company.

"I don't know how many members there are," he finished, "but certainly there are more than sixteen, for there are the 'probationers,' like me, to reckon with; those who haven't yet become full-fledged pawns. There is a capital piece, pawn, and probationer in different cities; for instance, here in New York, Howard Roupell is the King's bishop, Corby the pawn, and I the probationer. With the exception of Joyce and another, these are all the members I know. And I wouldn't have known about Joyce but for what you said a minute ago. You meant that *he* had been detailed to watch me?"

"Yes." And I related briefly all that had happened at Mr. Varney's, and the attempt on my life in Philadelphia and the subway.

"This is all news to me!" exclaimed Frean. "Roupell never said a word to me about suspecting you; I suppose I wasn't to be trusted. Well, they were right, as it turns out; maybe they knew me better than I knew myself. But those fellows in Philly might have been ordinary thugs, and are you quite sure you were shoved in front of that train?"

"Oh, quite; there's no mistake. I knew I was a marked man before you told me, and I've grown quite used to it. They made a third try to-night."

"To-night? You mean me—my being here——"

"No, I don't. I was up at Claremont——" And I related the incident. "Of course I can see now that Joyce must have telephoned from the Claremont that I'd slipped the detective who's been watching me, and they fixed it up to take me out of the beaten track which I've been sticking to closely. You can make a blow-out to order if you want, and they had the surprise package all ready. It would have served me right if the thing had come off as they planned, for I should have obeyed orders. You see, the Blunt Agency's been on the job for the past week, and I've been guarded like a pet lamb."

"The Blunt Agency! You mean, Lisping Jimmie?" cried Frean, with a look of fear. "This, then, explains everything. No wonder you're a marked man! They must suspect what you've done. I had

absolutely no knowledge of this. I've been all kinds of a rotter, Lawton, but I'd no hand in those two attempts on your life. Yet I admit that I wanted you out of the way, not because you were an enemy of the society—because I didn't know that—but because I hated you. Listen, did you suspect that that affair last night was all prearranged, that if you had consented to fight me and accompanied Roupell and me to the place I named, it would have been the end of you?"

"Oh, yes, I saw that pretty clearly, though that wasn't the reason I dodged the invitation. I had an idea Roupell and you had set the stage. As you weren't drunk, I saw no logical reason why you should insist on being licked again—for you know very well you haven't a chance with me, and Roupell overplayed his hand a bit."

"You're no fool, Lawton; it would take a mighty clever man to get to windward of you. You're far sharper than I, for, even knowing Roupell as I do, I never thought he was playing a double game with me. He told me he hated you secretly because you'd cut him out with a woman last winter—the Swedish dancer, Nelson——"

"That's all piffle. I met Selma Nelson exactly twice, and never alone."

"He worked on my hatred and jealousy," continued Frean, "for I may as well admit that my regard for Miss Gelette is more than that of a mere

friend. But don't think I'm still fool enough to imagine there's any hope for me in that quarter," he finished lifelessly. "She's done with me. I've lost, as I deserved, while you've won out, as you deserved. I know that."

"Then you know a lot. I haven't the slightest reason to consider myself in such a fortunate position, rather the reverse, in fact. Leaving Miss Gelette out of it, I wouldn't think of trying to saddle any woman with my inheritance——"

"A million or so? Most of them wouldn't mind."

"I wasn't speaking of dollars, and they aren't everything. I mean, I'd have to be a good deal surer than I am at the present moment that I've killed out the drink craze for all time."

"Well, anyway," he said, with a shrug, "I'm out of it, and I don't feel bitter toward you any longer. If it wasn't you, it would be some one else —never me. But, as I said, Roupell worked on my jealousy, and had me so I didn't know what I was doing. I was afraid of him, too—and I'm afraid of him yet. He put me up to coming here to-night, saying how easy it would be, and he intimated that if I didn't do it, I would find myself 'removed'—that being their polite term for murder. It was a case of your life or mine. This, then, was my first suspicion that it wasn't such a private and personal matter between you and Roupell as he would have me believe. I realized that I was to

be the instrument. That finished me. From something Roupell let drop the other day, I suspected that the society had had a hand in the killing of poor Ashton. The thought was driving me crazy, Lawton."

"Yes, I should think it would."

"Well," added Frean, "I determined to end it tonight, to come here, pretending to carry out Roupell's orders, and confess everything to you. I've done so. Now let them do their worst." And he sank back wearily, with white, haggard face. "Anyway, it's all up with me, for if they don't get me, the law will. That fellow Blunt has a reputation for getting what he goes after, and he must have the case cut and dried by this time."

"No, far from it. It's a tough proposition, and we've hardly made any headway—but we shall now. Of course, I guarantee you complete immunity where the law's concerned; that's no more than your right. Now, have you any idea who is at the head of this crime trust, the man known as the Black King?"

He looked at me queerly for a moment in silence. "Yes, that's the one other member I said I knew. But surely you know. The Black King is Theodore Varney."

CHAPTER XIX

I LEARN A LOT MORE

FREAN'S last words rendered me speechless, all my old suspicions regarding Theodore Varney boiling to the surface of my mind. The fact of my genuine regard for the man wasn't enough to stay them. First suspicions are hard to dispossess.

"But that's impossible!" I exclaimed at length. "Varney's been investigated pretty nearly back to Adam, and there was absolutely nothing to show him guilty of the smallest legal offense, let alone being head of a crime trust."

Frean looked at me with a sort of pitying expression. "Investigated by you personally?"

"No, by Blunt, too."

"Then Blunt, being the man he is, may have found out more than he has told you. As a rule, clients aren't let in on everything till the case is finished, sometimes not even then."

"I admit that. But why should I get a code message from the King in Philadelphia, while Varney was at Sea Bright? And where would be the sense in having Joyce smuggled into the house? And why would Varney write of himself: 'Varney moves on second?' No, there's no sense in it; it isn't logical."

"On the contrary," said Frean, "I think if you consider it carefully, it will appear entirely logical. I believe that those two messages were meant simply to throw you off the track. How do you know that the first one actually came from Philadelphia? There was no address, was there?"

"No, but there was the postmark on the envelope."

"And what was to stop them using another envelope, from a letter, say, that Varney had got that day? I believe that the second message was even dropped purposely for you to find. Those messages were a bait, if you ask me; they may have wanted to see what you'd do with them, to see how much you knew. Haven't you said that they must have known for over a week before you left that you were an impostor?"

"Yes, they must have, according to Joyce's stay in the hospital."

"Well, and as for Joyce himself, he simply comes back to his master. There isn't anything to prove your theory that there was a plot to remove Jules. He may have gone back to the bottle of his own sweet will, and Corby's drinking with him doesn't show anything. Joyce may have been planted with Mr. Fremstad for a reason and, his work done, returns to his master. Mr. Fremstad may be the potential victim."

"That's a new idea."

"Well, of course, I'm only guessing," added

Frean. "Fremstad may be a member for all I know. The one and only positive fact that I do know is that Varney is the Black King. I can prove it just as I can prove that Roupell is the King's bishop. But you see what it means? Suffering and disgrace for Brenda Gelette. Of course, she has no idea of the truth. For her sake and because I was in fear of my own life—perhaps that was the stronger reason—I've kept this under my hat. But now it's up to you, Lawton. You can't hit Varney without hitting his niece, but if you still decide to go through with the thing, I'm ready to do my bit. I've the necessary proof under lock and key at home, but if you don't use it, no one else shall."

"There can be no question of Miss Gelette in this," I said. "These fellows have got to be smashed, no matter who suffers, but I'll only believe Varney guilty when I see the indisputable proof. Look here," I added, fixing my eyes on him, "are you trying to slip anything over on me? If you're not playing straight, Frean, I'll clean your clock for you! I'll show you absolutely no mercy."

He made a weary, impatient gesture that was convincing in itself. "What could I put over on you? Look at that gun and think what I could have done if I was still your enemy. No, I've come to you for help and am telling you nothing but the truth. I've no spite against Brenda Gelette, either;

if I had, I could have informed on her uncle long ago if I cared to face the risk. There's a decent spot in the worst of us, Lawton, and I'd do a lot to save her from suffering. Surely, if you knew that Joyce and Corby and I were members of the Black Company, you must have suspected Varney; otherwise why should we three be in Sea Bright?"

"At first I suspected him, but afterward I thought there was a plot of some kind against him, and that you had come down to help it along. Of late I haven't known what to think, for we could prove no connection between him and his crime trust. When did you find out, and does he know? And what are these proofs you mention?"

"No, he isn't aware that I know. I don't wonder you've difficulty in believing him a member of this gang; I had myself and I've known him far longer than you. I've known him off and on for the past ten years, our families having met in the Berkshires one summer. Of course I'd no idea when I joined the society that Varney was its head."

"But the proof?"

"I've got the best in the world, not only about Varney but Roupell. I got possession of code messages showing Varney to be the Black King and Roupell to be the King's bishop; they passed between them via Corby. These messages also contained a reference to the murder of Ashton. I obtained possession of them long enough to take photos of

them. They were in Varney's and Roupell's handwriting. I guess that's proof enough."

Frean had hardly finished speaking, when the desk telephone rang, and, taking down the receiver, I heard the welcome and well-known lisping voice of Blunt. It was a fortunate happening, for I didn't know his private address, and, it being Sunday night, I had been wondering how to get in touch with him before morning.

"Hello, thith you, Mr. Lawton?" came his sleepy, lisping drawl. "Yeth, thith ith Blunt talking. . . . . Yeth, ith quite all right. Nobody's listening in; I've theen to that. I'm at the Waldorf, and a taxi with a couple of my men will call in ten minutes to bring you here. Can you leave without the houthe detective and my man in front theeing you?"

"Yes, I can go down the back way and leave by the employees' entrance on the side street. But look here——"

"Wait. I want you to get thith right. The car will wait for you at the employees' entrance. If possible, I don't want my man to know you've left; a certain party is watching him, and if my man thinks you still in, the other party will, too. Thee? Bring Mr. Frean with you——"

"How in thunder did you know——"

"Oh, a little bird told me," he drawled. "We have the case about cut and dried. Tell Frean that thith ith his one and only chance to square the

game. He can either come with you and face the Black King here, or wait to be scooped. It's all one to me. Ta, ta! Thee you later." And the wire clicked as he rung off.

"Lisping Jimmie?" queried Frean, as I hung up the receiver. He was pale and his voice trembled, though he tried to appear composed. "What's up? What did he say about me?"

I related the conversation.

"What did I tell you?" said Frean, with a fatalistic shrug. "He wasn't telling you anything. You can't beat him. He must have old Varney dead to rights. Well, I've beaten him to it; I've squared the game already, and he doesn't have to put on the screws. You won't go back on me, Lawton? You know I told you everything of my own free will before I knew of this round-up?"

I wasn't so sure that he hadn't known of it, at least suspected its imminence and made a virtue of necessity. But I said nothing. I couldn't blame him for trying to get the best out of his unenviable position. Far better to appear as a voluntary penitent, a savior of my life and all that, than to await inevitable arrest. He was a born turner of State's evidence.

I was rather floored by the unexpected and sudden turn of events. Rather irritated, too. I hate to be thought stupid, and yet I had sadly underestimated Jimmie Blunt. But resentment at the thought

of his keeping everything so quiet till the last moment was stilled when I recollected how often I had disobeyed his strict injunctions. I was cut up, too, about Varney. For all Frean's convincing talk, I had held a sneaking hope that he was honestly mistaken about the man. But Blunt's being at the Waldorf, and his words concerning the Black King, admitted of no other construction.

"I suppose Blunt's waiting to play his big ace, pull off a grand dramatic tableau. They all do," said Frean, with a sneer. "Well, I'll play my part; can't do anything else. Mind if I take a slug of brandy? It's going to be a beastly scene. I'd stay out of it if I were you."

"I hadn't a chance to decline. I suppose I'm a necessary supernumerary."

"Rather you're the necessary angel of the show, and the stage manager wants to give you full value. You're entitled to a front seat. Well, you've done some good with your money, Lawton, though Miss Gelette may not see it that way all at once."

"Forget it, will you? I can think of that part without your help. Are you coming?"

He nodded, picked up the revolver and threw it on a chair. "Keep it as a souvenir, Lawton. Remember what I could have done with it, and that you've sworn to help me."

I had always known him for a secret coward, and now, instead of pity, I felt a mighty disgust. He

was in a state verging on absolute funk, and helped himself to another hooker before quitting the room.

I was familiar with every twist and corner of the building, and had left by the employees' entrance more than once in my abortive attempts to elude the oppressive vigilance of Nast.

"I'm just as glad we're taking this route," said Frean, as we dodged the elevators and went down the back stairs. He wiped his damp forehead. "Some of our friends may be watching the front entrance, and might risk everything for a crack at us. After all, it's something to have a fellow like Blunt watching over one. I've learned to believe in the majesty of the law. It's a mighty good thing for me that it exists."

We got down the back stairs and out of the employees' entrance, halfway down the block, without glimpsing any one but a stray bell boy. A taxi was waiting with purring engine, and a couple of men were posted on either side of the open door.

"Mr. Lawton?" queried one, as we approached. "Yes, sir, the Blunt Agency. The Waldorf, Jack," he added to the chauffeur. "Let her go."

Frean and I jumped in, followed by the two men, the door slammed, and we were off.

The next moment I stopped a tremendous wallop behind the ear that sent me to the floor. I heard Frean's half-hysterical giggle, and for a brief time

the closed and darkened car rocked as I tried to put up some kind of a fight against hopeless odds.

I think at that I might have had some kind of a show but for Frean. He was half crazy with fear and hatred—a deadly mixture—and he went at me like a wild cat with everything he had, while he urged on the other three. For another man had appeared from nowhere.

"Don't give him a chance!" he kept snarling. "Throw it into him, boys! He'll take more killing than a bull."

Finally some one got an elbow under my chin, my head was forced back, and a sweetish-smelling sop jammed over my mouth and nose. And so I quit.

CHAPTER XX

THE BLACK KING

IT is strange how occasionally one has a repetition of the same fantastic dream. I dreamed now, as I did that night at Varney's, that Corby was an animate Black bishop trying to drown me in a vat of buttermilk, and, awakening, I found him sitting staring at me with the familiar and repugnant lifeless eyes set in the dead-white face. He now wore a straggling fair beard, which didn't help his beauty. It wasn't false, because no imitation could have been such a failure.

I was lying, "hog-tied," on a couch in a barely furnished room. I was full of aches and pains as a jumping tooth, while the chloroform or ether had made me sick. But I was more sick with myself, with my trusting faith and stupidity and I groaned inwardly when I thought of what Blunt would say of it all. For one who had always rather prided himself on his cleverness I had made a sad hash of things.

I was gratified somewhat to discover that Corby had a discolored eye and several plaster crosses on his ugly, top-heavy dome. Evidently he had been a member of the reception committee, waiting in-

side the cab, and whose presence I hadn't suspected until too late.

He now sat at a little table, munching Swiss cheese and pretzels, and swilling buttermilk, just as I had seen him do at Knight's, just as dispassionately and thoroughly. As if attracted by the smell of the cheese, and encouraged by the silence, a mouse crept out from a corner and watched us for a moment with bright, inquisitive eyes, then scuttled away home. As I had free use of my tongue, I took it that we were in some place where I might burst my lungs with noise and be none the better for it; so I decided to save my breath. I decided also to keep my temper.

"Well, Corby," I said, "how long are you going to sit staring at me like a stuck pig? Speak up and say how happy you are to see me. Don't be bashful. You're not looking well. What's the matter with your eye?"

His thin lips opened in a mirthless smile. "You are a good fighter and a very clever man, Mr. Lawton," he said, with as much emotion as if he were speaking of the weather. "It's a pity, speaking of stuck pigs, that so much good bone and muscle and intellect as yours should go to feed the worms."

"I agree with you, but that's the ultimate fate of us all, isn't it, unless we choose the fishes? What's the idea? Why not have fed me to the worms at once, instead of carting me here?"

"Orders are orders, Mr. Lawton, and that isn't within my province. But don't worry about the worms."

"I can't help it, Corby. Naturally I don't want to figure at such a banquet earlier than I can help. Let us have a straight business talk, like sensible fellows. As I understand it, this Bowery melodrama troupe of half-baked highbinders, of which I'm surprised to see you're a member—for you seem to have more intelligence, and you should have better taste—are simply out for profit. Well, cast your avaricious thoughts on my various bank balances, and then name your figure. As a starter, how would ten thousand do to set me foot-loose and give me a chance at that window? No playing with fingers crossed, of course."

"Bribery? Fie! Mr. Lawton," he said, with grave reproof. Then he took out a double-edged knife and began to sharpen it with the air of one attending to a trivial detail. "You got me in bad with the Company for the way you slipped it to me at Sea Bright," he said, without anger or even interest. "There's some things money can't buy, Mr. Lawton. When they're done with you I believe I'm to have the pleasure of attending to you." A voracious light suddenly appeared in his dead eye as he rubbed the knife on the sole of his shoe.

"Put that thing away, you ghoul!" I said, sud-

denly growing very angry because I couldn't help feeling frightened. I knew it wasn't only talk with him, a trick to scare me. "I believe a lot of you are half crazy——"

The door opened. Roupell came in; and Corby, saluting like a wooden soldier, went out.

Roupell pulled up a chair and sat down by the couch, a gleam of malice and amusement in his cushioned eyes. "What a predicament for a really clever man! I'm sorry, Lawton, but you would use your beastly money, you know, and horn in where you weren't wanted."

"If you leave me five minutes alone with Frean, even with my hands tied, I'll call all bets off," I said.

"Oh, you really mustn't blame him too much. Weren't you anxious to learn all about the Black Company—an unfortunate obsession, Lawton—and didn't he oblige you? Much of what he told you was the truth; otherwise you wouldn't have believed him. And then you had to be prepared for that stirring message from the famous and, by the way, quite incompetent Lisping Jimmie. Did it never occur to you that a lisping voice, especially over the phone, is the easiest thing in the world to imitate?"

I didn't know which was the worst, Corby with his colorless face and manner, and his methodically sharpening the knife on his shoe, or this Falstaff, who stroked his fat paunch and beamed at me. In

diametrically opposite ways they expressed the same sentiment—fixity of purpose and utter ruthlessness.

"It takes such elaborate stage setting, such infinite attention to detail, to impress a really clever fellow like you, Lawton," he went on, in his playful manner. "You gave us a lot of trouble, I'll admit. You were so deucedly well guarded, and, except for to-night, after leaving the Claremont, we couldn't coax you off the beaten track. I'll do you the justice to say you often tried to shake those agency bloodhounds—but no doubt you refrained from exerting your full and vast intelligence. After your skillful evasion of last night's trap and that of to-night—I won't say the former was due simply to cowardice and the latter to bad marksmanship and bull luck—we saw that the lion must be taken in his lair. We suspected you had engaged the services of the Blunt Agency, but we were sure of nothing; we didn't know how much you really knew. You have very kindly told us of your own sweet will. There's nothing like an exchange of information, a heart-to-heart talk with a repentant sinner."

"You needn't rub it in, Roupell. I can manage to understand the sort of an ass I've been without all this labored sarcasm. You always did spoil a good story by overemphasis, you know."

Even at such a time this remark touched him on the raw, as I knew it would. Perhaps it was the only one that had power to hurt him. He wouldn't

have minded being called a blackguard, but he was acutely jealous of his reputation as a raconteur.

"Yes, you're a great fool, Lawton," he said, with less amiability and more spite. "There's no fool like the one who thinks he isn't one. You've been an infernal nuisance, too, and have made your removal compulsory. We'd have let you alone if you'd let us alone. You understand that it's simply a business proposition, that we can't afford to have a paying concern injured simply because an interfering fool like you refuses to mind his own business. Instead of being content with your own fortune, you use it to try to take the bread out of the mouths of those who have never done you any harm."

"That's a novel way of putting it," I said. "Your psychology is beyond me. Well, what's the program in regard to me?"

"You'll learn that in due time. But for one thing your money is going to be of great help to us. You are going to order that dog-eared bloodhound, Blunt, back to his kennel, and write several fat checks to 'bearer.'"

"Am I? Not so much as a penny, Roupell."

"We shall see. You must understand your position, Lawton. We chose your servant's night out and gave that advice about the back stairs so that none would see you go. You may stay and rot here by inches, and none would be the wiser. I say you are going to write to Mr. Blunt, send him a

check for his services, and say that you've left town incognito; that you're tired of the whole business and want a rest."

"I shall do nothing of the kind—not that it would help you any, but simply as a matter of principle. You've overplayed your hand, as usual. For if Blunt was called off, there remain the police, over whom I've no control. The police of three States are after this paying concern of yours, and my disappearance will only make the hunt keener."

"That's a feeble bluff," he said, smiling contentedly. "The police have no evidence, and refuse to believe that we exist. Credit us with knowing something. Blunt isn't the man to share your information with rivals, he'll be wanting all the glory for himself. The jealousy between private agencies and the police is well known and approved by us. No, you must understand your position, Lawton, and not make it harder than it need be. It may not be a matter of your life if we can come to a satisfactory understanding. I repeat that it's simply a business proposition, and, rest assured, we'll take every necessary measure for our protection. You shall do exactly as we say, sooner or later."

"Well, I guess I can stand anything but one of your alleged funny stories. Meanwhile, how about easing these ropes a bit and giving me a glass of water?"

"I'm truly sorry, Lawton, but, as the legislators

say, the answer is in the negative. Nothing to eat or drink, not a mouthful of thick, nor a toothful of moist, until you come to terms. Nor dare we let you foot-loose, for we haven't had time to prepare an appropriate dungeon. You remain as you are, and Corby occupies the same room. For your own good, I must warn you that he has certain orders in case you attempt to escape—which I admit is virtually impossible. Still, he has a personal score to settle with you, so I wouldn't advise you to give him the slightest chance. Ta, ta! Thee you later," he finished, with a perfect imitation of the lisping voice of Blunt.

"Hold on," I said. "Will you tell me one thing? Is Varney really the head of this amiable paying concern, or was that a lie, too?"

"You'll meet the Black King all in good time," was all he said.

Corby not appearing when Roupell left, I had a whole-hearted try at my bonds; but Samson himself would have been unable to burst them, for the job had been thoroughly done. The aggravating fact was that, once free, I would have a chance of getting away, for the window was unbarred. As Roupell said, there had been no time to prepare a proper prison, and I was quartered in a humble wooden dwelling; but where it was situated I had no idea, nor could I estimate what time had elapsed

between the fight in the taxi and my regaining consciousness.

If you have ever been hog-tied by a skilled and conscientious hand you will know just how powerless and cramped I was. I saw absolutely no chance of freeing myself for all my great strength. I had often read of storybook heroes in a similar position who had effected wonderful escapes, how they had severed their bonds with a bit of broken glass or by burning them over a lamp or candle, unmindful of great personal suffering. But I wasn't providentially provided with any such articles; a single incandescent lighted the room, and, even if given the chance, I would be quite unable to reach any impromptu instrument.

Then I had an idea. It dawned upon me with the reappearance of the hungry and inquisitive mouse, which, accompanied by several friends or relatives, came out to forage again. They saw what I had neglected to see until that moment—that in removing the remains of his frugal supper, Corby had dropped a slab of cheese.

It lay close beside the couch; and the foraging party, bold with hunger, made an enterprising attack on it, contemptuous of my presence. But I needed it more than they, and I routed them by jerking my head over the couch; then came the undignified and difficult task of picking up that bit of cheese with my teeth alone. I can recommend this feat

to all athletes who wish a new form of indoor sport; but it would be fatal to fat men.

There remained the still difficult task of placing the bit of chesse under me and against the cords connecting my feet and hands. The warmth of my body would do the rest. In all this I succeeded simply because I knew I must, for I was reduced to a position where a lowly piece of cheese might mean the difference between life and death. I had no faith in Roupell's statement that I would be spared if I agreed to do their bidding; they would utilize me first, and then put an end to me. They couldn't afford to let me live.

I had hardly finished performing my novel calisthenics when the door opened, and, instead of Corby, Frean entered. He sidled over to the couch like a maimed crab and looked at me in the most curious and repulsive manner. It was a blending of hatred, fear, triumph and shame. Yes, he had the grace to be ashamed, yet at the same time I knew he wouldn't lift a finger to undo the work he had done. More curious still, he started to justify and excuse himself, while reviling me in the same breath.

"I couldn't do anything else," he said. "I told you it was my life or yours, and so it was. They'd have killed me if I hadn't hooked you. You're going to get yours at last, you big bruiser! I owe you for a lot, and it's going to be paid. And when you're under the sod I'll marry Brenda Gelette! I'll

marry her, do you hear? I'll make her glad to marry me! I'll make you sweat blood for that licking you gave me, for every lying thing you've said about me—for—for——"

"Well, don't get hysterical, Frean. I quite understand your trying to justify yourself. I dare say even the original Judas did. I congratulate you on your acting, and never knew you had it in you. It was simply a masterpiece. That part about the revolver was great, and I fell for it like a child. Of course, I see now you would never have run the risk of using it; that would take some courage and nerve. Now, don't spoil such a fine bit of work by trying to explain it. Such gems don't need explaining any more than a beautiful sunset. They're beyond it."

"Yes, I know what you think of me," he said, plucking at a trembling lip. "But you or any one would have done just the same in my position. You would if—if you'd been taught to know what fear is. And I'm not sorry!" he shouted in swift transition, working himself into a frenzy. "I'd do it again! And so would you, if you hated any one as I hate you!"

Now I had no desire to prolong this edifying discourse; I knew it was no use appealing to Frean, nor could I have brought myself to attempt it. There are some things one can't do. They say there is some good in the worst of us, and so I had always

believed until I came to know the real Frean. I realized now, when too late, the truth of what Mr. Hannay and Ashton had said—that there was absolutely nothing to appeal to in him. He was too utterly selfish, too utterly a coward; too utterly weak, vicious, and depraved. A man who could act as he had done was past understanding. While he stood chattering there, I might be losing my one chance of escape. If I could get him out of the room before Corby returned—granting that they thought I really needed a jailer—then the little play of the Lion and the Mouse—though indeed I felt anything but a lion—could begin all the sooner. So I closed my eyes and paid no attention to Frean, no more than as if he wasn't there. After yelling filth at me for a while and finding little satisfaction in it, he suddenly lost his last vestige of self-control and hit me a resounding blow in the face. Even that I accepted with outward equanimity and, with a final barrage of abuse, he left me.

"You'll say something before we're done with you!" were his final words. "You'll crawl for mercy. See if you don't!"

The mice came out, as though at a signal, the moment Frean closed the door. Evidently the good news of the free lunch had been broadcasted, for now the bread, or rather cheese line had increased most gratifyingly. I am sure there were a dozen of them, of all ages and sizes. I don't suppose they

got much to eat in that house and hunger had made them bold; for when I heaved over with my face to the wall, thus exposing my wrists, they squeaked and scuttled, but promptly came back.

I lay quiet, hardly daring to breathe, and they swarmed over me. I thought of Bishop Hatto and was glad they weren't rats. Rats are voracious creatures and might not have known or cared very much where the cheese ended and I began. Or do rats like cheese at all? I don't know much about them; no, nor mice either. They were never a hobby with me; in fact I never cared to know them intimately. As a boy, I was singularly lacking in the ambition to produce a white mouse or rat from my coat sleeve or the back of my neck, and now these mice were gayly cavorting over my face as they rushed to the feast. It was not pleasant.

As I had hoped, the warmth of my body had smeared the cheese thoroughly over the ropes binding my wrists and I couldn't see how this army could partake of one without the other. I felt them nibbling away, nor should it take very long for those sharp little fangs to begin what my strength could finish. I urged them on in silent and eloquent prayer.

"Go to it, you filthy little beggars. Little do you know what mighty events may wait upon your beastly appetites. Eat hearty, you vermin!"

I have heard a great deal about the efficacy of

prayer, but that one of mine seemed to be a dismal failure; perhaps it wasn't eloquent enough. At all events they suddenly squeaked in chorus, volplaned to the floor, and disappeared as if by magic. The next moment I heard heavy footsteps and, breathing a curse, I heaved over on my back.

The door opened and Roupell entered, Roupell and another man. They came over to the couch. "Let me present you to His Majesty, the Black King," said Roupell with an extravagant flourish. "I think you've met before."

We had. It was Big Tim Scallon.

CHAPTER XXI

I INTERVIEW HIS MAJESTY

I WAS disappointed. In the head of this crime trust I had looked for one who bore some outward and visible sign of that subtle and keen intelligence which undoubtedly ruled the affairs of the Company; I had expected a fine Toledo blade, as it were, and found only a crude bludgeon.

Even before asking that question of Roupell, I had guessed that Varney wasn't the Black King, that I had been correct in believing he had no guilty connection with the Black Company. Yet a personality and intelligence such as his would have fitted in more with my idea of what the head of such an organization should be like. It is true, of course, that some of the most effective weapons are not impressive to look upon, and this man was effective in his own way.

I may state here what I learned subsequently, that rather than Scallon being a victim of the "system," as I had always imagined, he had been the fountain whence flowed all the corruption and iniquity that made Philadelphia a byword ten years ago. He had all the vices and none of the virtues of the old-time political boss; none of the qualities with which I, in my ignorance, had credited him.

That genial smile of his was a mask, precisely like Roupell's; he was spawn of the gutter, the bad "get" of a bad breed. Moreover, I learned also why and how he had dropped out of the public eye, why I had heard nothing about him for years; the crusade that broke up his "ring" landed him in the penitentiary for three years, after a legal battle that cost him most of his ill-gotten gains. It was said, too, that he had more than one murder to his account, though he had escaped conviction.

There was something ludicrous in the thought that, of all people, I should have selected Tim Scallon as the one person able to tell me the truth about Fremstad and Varney. I thought of Blunt's remark about my being such an excellent judge of character. What irony! Conscious, of course, on his part; for Blunt must have known Scallon's true record if I did not. Yes, I was a superb judge of character; there was no getting away from it. I had even believed in Arnold Frean. I looked at Scallon now, a great lumbering hog of a man with sagging jowls, and marveled at my obtuseness. How had I been able to conceive him as anything but what he so obviously looked? He was overdressed as usual; there were diamonds on his short, hairy fingers; and another big lump of ice on his shirt front. A black cigar was tilted at an aggressive angle in a corner of his loose mouth. He personified brute force. Yes, a crude bludgeon.

But if Tim Scallon was a crude bludgeon, he was also an effective one, and if he hadn't the subtlety to devise, say, that secret code, he was precisely the sort to command the criminal intelligence that could. He was the Black King, the Boss, the great Bull Elephant whose trumpet made the lesser predatory animals tremble.

It was clear to me now that the nucleus of the Black Company was composed evidently of former henchmen, who, perhaps, had shared his disgrace and punishment. Perhaps, too, he was revenging himself now on society, though, for that matter, he had always lived by theft and violence pursued under the euphemistic name of politics. At any rate, I couldn't have fallen into worse hands, for he symbolized the spirit of the Black Company.

"Well, Mr. Nosey Parker, bong swor, as the French say. You ain't lookin' like I last seen you. Pretty nice place this, ain't it?"

"Yes, not so bad; much better than the company."

"How's that detective bureau you were workin' for gettin' on, not to mention my old friend Bill Harrigan? Fancy Bill sendin' you to see me about old Varney! Real thoughtful of Bill!" He laughed and thumped me jovially on the shoulder. "Some little investigator, you are! Oh, I should shay sho."

"My mistake, Scallon," I said. "I never thought you were half the scoundrel you look. I'm learning."

"You are," he replied with sudden ferocity. "And take it from me, you'll learn a lot more before you and me see the last of each other. You ain't learned yet, you big tramp, to watch your own soup and leave other folks' alone. But I'm gonna learn you. See?"

"Indeed."

"Yes, indeed and in fact. Guys like you gimme the royal pip. Livin' off dough that some stiff swiped in his day, and then because you ain't had the nerve to swipe it yourself, or the guts to work for it—yeah, I know you silk-stockin' reformers and philanthropists like a book. Vermin, that's what y'are; dirty, crawlin' vermin! There ain't one of you fit to lick the boots of the good boys you've sent to the pen by your love for buttin' in and free advertisin'; and there ain't a crook in the pen who wouldn't be ashamed to be seen with you. Yah!"

"I'm pleased to be classed as a philanthropist and reformer, Scallon. I've been called everything but that."

"You and your dirty money!" he bellowed. "Usin' it against me, ain't you?"

"I've a right to protect myself. You started this show; for I'm sure I can thank you for what happened to me in Philly."

"Yeah, and it ain't a marker to what's gonna happen to you. See? You started this by buttin'

in where you wasn't wanted; I'd have let you alone if you'd let me alone. Now you've gone too far. You started it, but I'm gonna finish it. See?"

He stopped trumpeting long enough to remove his cigar and level it at me like a weapon. "I gotta bone to pick too with that comic-supplement, gum-shoe boob you've hired to sew us up. There's been one standin' on his plate for ten years, since the days when he was a bull at headquarters here. He's gonna get what that boob you sent to Philly got, and you're gonna help him get it, see?"

"Am I?"

"Yes, y'are. You're gonna bait the trap, Mr. Buttinsky. You're gonna write the nice little letter that'll bring him here."

"Oh, no, I'm not, Mr. Scallon."

"And I say y'are! I come through on every play I make, and when I tell you you're gonna do as I say, you're gonna do it. See? If you don't see, I'll show you—just like this."

He sucked voraciously at the cigar until the white ash tumbled off and the end glowed crimson, then calmly applied the hot end to my cheek. "Next time I'll plunk it in your eye," he said, as I squirmed and bit back a scream. "We'll spoil your beauty, son, all right—make you a little more ugly than y'are. That's only a little taste of what's comin', if you're minded to keep your tail up. Now I'll leave you to mull it over; I got other fish to

fry. Next time I come in here you want to be in a responsive mood. See? I ain't gonna argue with you; you do as I say or your lamps won't be fit for nothin else but ash trays. Bong swor, as the French say, for the present."

To my infinite disgust, Corby came in as Scallon and Roupell went out, and, to my further disgust, he showed no signs of turning out the light and going to bed—there was a military cot by the window—like any reasonable human being. Of course it was necessary for my scheme that he should go to sleep, or at least that the room should be in darkness. If he sat there quietly, with the room lighted, the mice themselves would give the show away.

So much had happened since my leaving the Claremont, that perhaps I thought the night more spent than it actually was; yet it could not be far from midnight. I hoped that the eye strain produced by reading—Corby had settled himself with a book—would make him sleepy, and I began to help the good work along by yawning energetically. It is well known that this is very infectious, but somehow it had no effect on his perverse and abnormal nature.

"Can't you ease these ropes a bit and give me a chance to sleep?" I complained at length, not daring to say anything about the light. "Or is that part of the game?"

"No," he said, "I guess you may sleep all you

want to—if you can. Go ahead; don't mind me. I hope my reading isn't disturbing you. A very pleasant book this, Mr. Lawton; 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue.' Have you read it?"

"Oh, yes. A cheerful work, as you say. Have you ever read 'Forty Buckets of Blood?' I'm sure you would enjoy that, too. Did you know Poe?"

"He died long before my time. How old do you think I am?"

"I don't know. I thought Poe must have known you, for the principal character in that book you're reading seems to have been drawn from you."

"You mean the ape? Fie, Mr. Lawton; that's hardly complimentary."

"Well, if you're not an ape, Corby, show me. Now what's the use of all this Bowery melodrama? What is it going to bring you? Let us have a common-sense talk; you've only to name your price, and I give you my word——"

"Oh, fie, sir! You are trying to corrupt me. But my virtue is laid up in a place where moth and rust—you know the quotation. It's no use, Mr. Lawton; there are some things your money can't buy and I happen to be one of them. I won't talk to you any more; you're a bad man, sir." And he resumed his reading. So I saw my beautiful scheme going all to pot.

Presently I heard the throb of a motor which seemed to stop opposite the house. The night being

very warm, the window was open, and Corby, switching off the light, stuck his head out—an excellent position if only I had been foot-loose. Then a door banged downstairs, there came the sound of voices, and finally silence. Evidently there was other business afoot, which accounted for my comparative neglect. Perhaps the other fish which Scallon had to fry had arrived.

Corby switched on the light and took up his infernal book. "I suppose you are wondering who that is?" he said.

"Am I?"

"Yes, I'm sure you are. Well, I'll tell you; it's Mr. Varney. It would be a pity not to satisfy your inveterate curiosity."

The knowledge that the Black King was Tim Scallon pointed a probable solution to the mystery of Theodore Varney's connection with this crime trust. Although at this time I knew nothing of the jail sentence that Scallon had received, or how his ring had been broken up, his words to me had shown obviously a bitter hatred of reformers and philanthropists. It was quite possible that for some reason he had become Varney's deadly enemy, just as he was Blunt's—something I had never suspected. Perhaps Blunt and Varney had supplied evidence against him.

I had to bear in mind that all Varney's work for the public good was done clandestinely, and that

therefore in any case his name would not have figured in the case publicly. Yet the theory that Scallon was out for revenge against him, while logical enough, did not explain everything. I had yet to find where Joyce fitted in, and Frean too, for that matter. If merely to decoy Varney into the hands of Scallon, they could have accomplished it weeks ago. No, there was an important, an all-important part of the puzzle which I had missed completely.

Even while I thus assured myself, there came from below the awful tortured cry of a man goaded by pain to the point beyond human endurance. It sent the echoes of the old house on the rampage, and then died away as suddenly.

"Ah, Mr. Varney is tuning up his pipes. Must have slipped his gag," said Corby composedly, but with the voracious sparkle in his dead eye. "Your turn next, Mr. Lawton. Get all the rest you can; you'll need it."

All my fear had returned, and with that dreadful cry ringing in my ears, I was convinced that it was Varney. At the thought of that frail old man being put to the torture by these ghouls, I went berserk. I strained at my bonds in a sort of insane fury, putting forth all my strength, and suddenly the ropes about my wrists snapped. The mice had done their work.

CHAPTER XXII

FOOL'S LUCK

NOW it pains me even yet to write of what followed. Having conceived and contrived such an ingenious method of escape—and I needn't pretend that I don't think it pretty clever of me—why couldn't I have utilized it to the full? Why was I not able to free my hands without Corby knowing? Why couldn't I have suddenly sprung upon him, left him bound and gagged, rushed to the rescue of Varney, and rounded up the whole gang single-handed? It might easily have happened thus, but it didn't. Why had that rope to snap at the moment it did, when Corby was wide awake and even looking at me? I'm sure I don't know; things seem to happen adversely like that to some people, and I suppose it was down in the book of fate that I was never destined to play the hero. At any rate the result was disastrous.

To properly understand what followed you must remember how I was tied; my feet were bound behind me and fastened to my wrists so that I was like a bent bow, and when, without warning, the rope snapped, I was like that bow suddenly released. I was lying on my side at the time, and a six-foot

bow at full tension creates quite a disturbance when that tension is suddenly released. The result was that my legs flew down, my arms up, and I shot from the couch to the floor where I skidded like a tin Lizzie on a slippery road. The next moment Corby had taken a flying leap on my chassis.

Now my feet were still bound fast together, though my hands were free, but even with this drawback, I think I could have accounted satisfactorily for Corby—I had the makings of a good strangle hold on him—if it had not been for the entrance of Frean and a man whom I saw to be Joyce. Evidently they had heard the small riot. Frean danced around and offered advice, but the intensely practical Joyce lost no time in whipping a slung shot from his pocket and letting me have it, a very scientific wallop that didn't even break my scalp, but which caused me instantly to abandon the ambition to make Corby a corpse.

When I regained interest in the proceedings, I was back on the couch, hog-tied anew, while Corby was examining the broken rope. "Cheese!" he exclaimed. "For shame, Mr. Lawton," his dead eyes regarding me with mild reproof. "And I believe I've seen mice about. Tut, tut, this will never do. You're always trying to slip something under me, get me in bed with the Company. It isn't fair, it isn't right. I could almost believe you dislike me, Mr. Lawton."

"You shouldn't overexert yourself so unnecessarily on such a hot night, Lawton," added Frean with a nervous giggle. "You know I've warned you about apoplexy. Do be reasonable."

"Hope I didn't hurt you, sir," put in Joyce with mock concern. "You'll be glad to hear, sir, that I got that Eyetalian who was gunning for me the other night. Yes, sir, I had him arrested. And have you found out yet, sir, what it means by 'Varney moves on second?' Oh, yes, I saw you pick up the message that day; very thoughtful of you, sir."

I hardly heard their gibes for I was waiting to hear that awful cry again. The fact that Joyce was here showed beyond all doubt that Corby had told the truth and that Theodore Varney was indeed the victim of these scoundrels. And if Varney, what about Miss Gelette? Was she here, too? She went everywhere with her uncle, never let him out of her sight; even with the help of that smug and smiling villain, Joyce, I could hardly see how they had been able to decoy Varney without her knowledge.

"Frean," I said, "what is this ghastly game you're trying to work on poor Varney? What is it all about? Surely it won't do any harm to tell me now. If it's money you want——"

Again there came that dreadful cry, against which I couldn't even stop my ears. Frean paled and

looked rather sick, but Joyce grinned and said cheerfully "the old bird's got a fine register."

Corby nodded, head at a meditative angle, the voracious sparkle in his eye. "I like that note. I wish I was down there. You're missing something. Trade you jobs, if you like."

"Daren't," said Joyce and got up. "I'd better beat it."

"Frean," I cried, "for Heaven's sake stop that hellish business down there! I can't appeal to these brutes, but surely I can to you! You must have some decency left. You said I'd cry for mercy; well, I am. You see me now, if that's any satisfaction. Tell Scallon I'll do anything, pay anything——"

"You will in any case," he broke in with a white sneer, "and I've got nothing to do with it."

"You have! You can't salve your conscience that way. You pretended to be Varney's friend; you dined with him—why, man, you wouldn't torture a dog like that! He's an old man, an incurable invalid. Can't they even let him die in peace? Go down and tell Scallon he can have every penny I own——"

"I've got nothing to do with it!" he almost screamed. "Do you think they'd let me interfere? What do you take me for? Come along, Joyce." And he almost ran from the room.

"A very tender fellow," commented Corby. "A

little weak in the stomach; but he's coming on finely. He'll make a good member when he's had a little more experience. Quite a capable actor, too, don't you think? We all have our talents." And picking up his book he sat down on the foot of the cot and leaned against the window.

I found it impossible to keep my thoughts away from Corby's words about it being my turn next, and Scallon's reference about my eyes and ash trays. Apart from the smarting burn on my cheek —I carry the deep scar to this day—there was ample evidence that Tim Scallon was a man of his word, as he claimed.

Now, I'm no martyr—I think I've hinted at this before—and I knew it. Frankly, I don't care for that sort of thing, especially if you have to take it on an empty stomach and after a preliminary hammering. I've always admired the early Christian martyrs immensely, but admiration never went to the point of wanting to emulate them. I should like to believe I had the nerve and stamina to suffer to the last gasp for the sake of a principle, but at heart I knew quite well that Nero would have missed making a night light of me, or a meal ticket for the lions, if my tongue had known its business; so I contemplated with gloomy misgiving my coming interview with the Black King.

I didn't want to betray Blunt, and I had made up my mind to suffer a lot; I meant to stick it to

the finish if I could, just as old Varney was sticking it, but I wouldn't have taken any bets on my doing so. In fact, I had a humiliating and sneaking conviction that I'd do about anything before my eyes became ash trays, and this knowledge did not increase my self-respect or my love for those who had placed me in such a position.

All this time I was listening, and so was Corby, for another of those awful cries from below stairs; but none came and Corby finally picked up his book with a yawn.

"Must have lost consciousness," he said. "Stubborn old bird. It is remarkable, Mr. Lawton, how much pain the human anatomy can stand. History is replete with some very fine examples of fortitude. On the face of it, you should be able to stand far more than old Varney; you are a better physical machine. But then one has to consider the spirit as well as flesh. I've known big, hulking brutes like you to faint if they cut their own finger. I hope you aren't that kind; I hope you won't disappoint me."

"You are too grisly, Corby. You're overdoing it. It doesn't frighten me, I assure you. In fact, you're simply a bore."

He smiled pensively and resumed reading.

Now, as I looked at him, raging silently at my own utter helplessness, a strange thing happened, so strange and startling, indeed, that I wondered

for a moment if I were dreaming. There was not a breath of air in the humid night, and yet I saw the blind of the open window at Corby's back move slightly. I must have dreamed it—but, no, there it moved again. I was sure of it.

Corby looked at me over his book, as though attracted by my concentrated stare. "You look interested, Mr. Lawton. What's up?"

"I was only wondering," I said, "why you didn't go into the moving picture game. You're so beautiful. Your features should be perpetuated on the screen." I had to say something like that, for the blind had moved again, and I could hardly trust my voice.

"No more beautiful than you," he said. "We are a pair. But after to-night, I should be the more beautiful of the two. Yes, indeed. It is well, Mr. Lawton——" He suddenly gurgled and choked, for two hands had shot from under the blind and got him fast by the throat.

I never saw a quicker, neater bit of work. Being a vindictive sort where my enemies are concerned, I like to remember and ponder over that picture. Corby's startled, helpless expression quickly changed to one of rage and agony, as that viselike grip bit into his neck; he tried to pull his knife, but he hadn't a chance in the world, seated as he was below the window, and with those powerful hands gripping him from behind.

In a trice he was choked half senseless, slammed back on the cot, and then smothered as a wiry little figure followed the capable hands. Then, to hurry matters, the newcomer whipped a billy from his hip pocket, and tapped Mr. Corby scientifically on his bulging forehead; whereupon the proceedings ended as suddenly as they had begun.

Jimmie Blunt, somehow looking as neat and well dressed as a theatrical star, for all his bit of rough-and-tumble, and certainly as cool as the proverbial cucumber, winked at me out of a blue eye that was no longer suspiciously sleepy, but sparkling and alert.

"How'd that little act do for the movies?" he lisped, with his faint, winning smile. "Couldn't have had it staged better to order. Thanks for your help, Lawton. Hope they didn't maul you much."

"My help?" I exclaimed, as he slashed through my bonds with a six-inch clasp knife. "A fat lot of help I've been! How in thunder did you——"

"Soft pedal," he warned, dropping his own voice still lower. "We haven't time for post mortems now. Yes, I know Roupell, Frean, and Scallon are here, also Joyce and Varney——"

"Then it *was* Varney! They've been torturing him, Blunt——"

"Sorry. But I guess they didn't get very far——" He cocked an ear like a listening terrier as a door

slammed downstairs, and there came Roupell's voice and the rumbling trumpet of the Black King.

"They're coming up!" I said.

"Good!" said Jimmie. "Quick!" he added. "Back as you were. Here, take these nippers and keep them under you; snap 'em when I line 'em up. That's it."

While I lay down on the couch in my old position, Blunt worked in the swift, silent, effective fashion with which he had polished off Corby. There wasn't a wasted motion.

With incredible speed and dexterity he bound and gagged Corby with the cords that had lately decorated me, then unceremoniously shoved him out of sight beneath the cot. After this he took up a position against the wall beside the door, so that when the latter should open, it would conceal him.

He had hardly done so when the stairs began to complain under the weight of two such behemoths as the Black King and his chief lieutenant. Evidently something had gone wrong, for the bull elephant was angry and trumpeting loudly.

"Blast him!" we heard him say. "I'll sweat it out of th' old rip if it takes a year! I'll keep touchin' him up till he comes through, or my name ain't Scallon! He's gonna part, all right; you see if he don't. Any guy can stand for one knock-out, but it's th' keepin' at it with no let-up that get 'em."

He kicked the door open and lumbered into the room, followed by Roupell; and evidently so secure did both feel that neither bothered to close the door.

"Where th' blazes is Corby?" demanded Scallon, turning on his lieutenant, after shooting me a scowling glance. "What kind of discipline is this? Why ain't he here?"

"I don't know. I gave him his orders," faltered Roupell. "He should be here." And his eyes began to rove as if he expected to discover Corby on the walls or ceiling.

"Should be here! It's your business to see he is," rasped Scallon. He removed his cigar and bellowed "Corby!" his mottled face growing purple.

Then the door slammed and showed Blunt with a leveled automatic resting on his hip. "Put 'em up, Tim!" he said crisply. "You, too, Rose. Up with 'em, quick! You know me, so none of your soapy work. I'll be glad of an excuse to save the State the expense of another trial."

As the twin mountains of flesh were standing with their backs to me, I couldn't observe, unfortunately, by their expressions what they felt at receiving this startling surprise package. But whatever their emotions, however desperate, courageous, and resourceful they evidently knew of old this quiet, dapper little man, whose eyes were now hard and bright as blue diamonds.

Reluctantly, very reluctantly but surely their hands

were elevated, and, keeping their persons between me and the watchful .38, I snapped on the bracelets. Then Blunt frisked them.

The port-wine complexion of Roupell—or Rose, as Blunt had called him—had become more the color of absinth. He sagged at the hinges, and looked for once more than his age. But I must say Scallon took it well; brute beast though he was, and foul with crime, he had the animal courage which receives its due everywhere.

"Well, Jimmie, count one to you," he said casually, as if marking up a billiard game. But his eyes were raging. "You always did play in fool's luck."

"Yes," agreed Blunt, who never gloated, "I always did, Tim. If you can't be clever, be lucky. It's just as good, or better."

"Butted in on a lone hand, eh? Well, whatja got on me?" demanded Scallon, beginning to trumpet. His eyes were now shrewd and speculating. "You got nothin' on me but th' kidnappin'—if you can call it that—of this big tramp here. An' that'll take some provin'. You can't hang nothin' on me, an' you know it. A private bull like you ain't got no right to make an arrest, anyway. Flash your warrant. I demand to see it. I know my rights, an' I got th' coin an' pull to see I get 'em——"

"You'll get them, Tim; don't worry about that. Inspector Lannigan's been playing in fool's luck, too, and so has Bright, of the secret service. They

should be here any minute now. The joint's been pinched out, and there's a hurry-up wagon round the corner waiting for you. They pulled your Philadelphia headquarters about an hour ago."

"Yah!" jeered Scallon. "Whatja take me for? That stuff has whiskers on it. Think I'll fall for it?"

But his expression changed swiftly as there came from below, from all sides of the house, in fact, the crash of splintered glass and rending wood. There followed sounds of a small-sized riot, several pistol shots, and then comparative silence.

"There's your answer, Tim," said Blunt laconically. "We've been lucky again, and it's all over but the lining up. You and Roupell—as he prefers to call himself—don't want to miss the roll call, so beat it."

As they were herded through the door, Scallon turned, his nonchalance gone, and his mottled face now distorted with rage. "I'll get you for this, Blunt!" he said thickly. "I'll get you some day if it takes a lifetime! I'll get you if it's th' last thing I do. There ain't nothin' in this world can keep me from settlin' with you!"

"Perhaps not," said Jimmie soberly. "Meanwhile——" And he prodded him with the pistol.

The house was simply swarming with uniformed police and plain-clothes men, among the latter being, as I learned later, a number of Federal officers.

We hadn't gone far along the corridor when we met a grizzled, gold-laced official, whom I recognized, from pictures I'd seen, as Inspector Lannigan, of the New York force.

I discovered afterward that the solemn, cherubic individual in citizen's dress who accompanied him was the noted Chief Bright, of the secret service. He was famed for his silence, which he now bore out, for I didn't hear him say a single word through the subsequent proceedings.

"Good work, Jimmie!" said Lannigan familiarly, for Blunt had formerly served under him. "It's a clean bag and only one casualty. What about the man Corby?"

"Back in that room, all ready for shipping. You boys'll find him under the bed. Where's Mr. Varney?"

"In there," said Lannigan, thumbing toward a door at the end of the corridor. "They put him over the jumps, but he never blabbed. A game old gentleman, Jimmie; as fine and game a one as I ever saw. I only wish we could have got here before they hurted him, the dirty blackguards!"

He whirled on Scallon, his eyes flaming like an old war eagle's, and his Irish parentage more in evidence. "Ye white-livered swine!" he said. "Them haythens in Beljum is Christian gentlemen to you! Get along down there wid the rest of your scum!"

"Down there" was the lower hall, where I glimpsed Joyce and two others—probably my assailants of the taxi—standing handcuffed, and in charge of several officers; and Scallon, propelled by a hearty kick from the irate Lannigan, joined them on all fours. Never was a king dethroned so completely.

We entered the room pointed out by Inspector Lannigan, but I saw no sign of Mr. Varney, its sole occupants being a couple of Federal officers and a man whom I had never seen before. He was past middle age, and very distinguished looking. He lay on a couch, his feet naked, and the sole of one of them a mass of raw blisters. The sight was horrible, and I wished I had helped to kick Scallon donwstairs.

After a whispered word with one of the officers, Blunt beckoned me out and the door was closed. "The ambulance will be here soon," he said. "The best thing you and I can do is to beat it home. The show's over."

"But where's Mr. Varney?" I demanded. "I must see him. And who's that poor fellow in there?"

"Why, that's Mr. Varney."

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed. "You've made a big mistake. I know Varney, and that fellow——"

"Is his brother, and the only Varney that ever figured in this case," finished Blunt, the ghost of a twinkle in his blue eye.

CHAPTER XXIII

BLUNT EXPLAINS

FOR a time I was prevented from inquiring further into this amazing matter of Varney's brother, a person, by the way, whose existence I had forgotten. I learned later that he had been transferred to the room we had just quitted, following his first ordeal by fire, which had taken place in the kitchen.

As Blunt and I now passed downstairs to the lower hall, we saw in what was evidently the dining room the body of a man stretched on the table, a policeman standing guard over it. It was covered with a sheet, yet something familiar in the outline, I cannot tell why or how, caused me to pause.

"Is that the fellow who was killed?" I asked rather fatuously.

"Yes, sir," said the policeman.

I entered the room and lifted the sheet. Yes, I had been right; it was Arnold Frean. What a strange working of chance that he should prove the only one to be killed! No doubt but that there were others in the house who deserved such a fate far more than he. I looked at him, his face now

ennobled by death, all the vice and meanness gone, and thought of what might have been, had he only taken the right turning. How all too easy it is to take the wrong! I wondered, thinking of those far-off days in Princeton, had he ever had an inkling of such an end to the hectic story he was even then writing in the book of life—to die here, shot down like a dog, an associate of criminals. But who among us has an inkling of his own fate?

"Well," said Blunt, baring his head, "he has settled all earthly debts. Perhaps it's best that he went out when and as he did."

Perhaps; and yet, Heaven knows, I would it had been otherwise. My heart was heavy, and I suddenly felt weary and old. "How did it happen?" I asked the policeman.

"It wasn't none of our doin'," he replied, and then he added ingenuously: "We didn't get a chanst."

"You mean he shot himself?" queried Blunt. "Suicide, eh?"

"No, sir," said the officer, "he shot himself all right, but the funny part was he didn't mean to. It was like this, sir: He was here by his lonely in this room when me and another of the boys come through the windy on the signal. He pulled a gun, but instead of throwin' down on us, he kept wavin' it around like a flag while he hollered blue murder and jumped all over the shop like a

crazy flea, us leppin' after him same's a merry game of tag. Then he tripped and fell, and the gun went off and killed him quicker'n winkin'. I never seen anythin' like it. He must have been drunk or bughouse, mebbe both."

But I knew that Frean had only been drunk with fear; he had been scared out of his wits. Yes, best perhaps that the end had come as it did, best at least for his people. With the help of Blunt, I could hush it up so far as the public was concerned. And, indeed, I may add here that, with the exception of a small, and for the most part official circle none has known the real Arnold Frean's connection with the notorious Black Company, and the true incidents leading up to his accidental death.

Owing to the obscure and isolated situation of the house, we weren't troubled with the attentions of inquisitive neighbors or newspaper men, and when the ambulance from Roosevelt had come and gone, and the patrol wagon was loading up with the Black King and his courtiers, Blunt and I left the house.

"I don't think I've thanked you yet for saving me from a very unpleasant interview with Mr. Scallon," I said, as we headed for Broadway and civilization. "I've been a fearful ass, Blunt, and deserved the little I got."

He smiled. "Oh, we can all be wise after the

event; and Frean's acting would have fooled anybody."

"How did you know about that?" I demanded.

"Oh, a little bird told me, as Roupell would say. I agree with you that he's an excellent mimic. He'll have time now to learn how to imitate the voice of a hammer on stones. He's neither too old nor too fat for the road gang. It should do him a world of good."

At the thought of the bogus Falstaff forced to such manual labor, I felt considerably cheered. "He'll have a hard time getting a funny story out of that," I said. "But what about this brother of Varney's? What about everything, in fact? You've got to tell me a lot."

"Only on the condition that you keep it under your hat, Lawton." Somehow we had forgotten each other's prefix. "I don't mean simply about Frean. For certain adequate reasons this business about Silas Varney won't be made public."

"Why?"

"Well, did you know he was a prominent member of the United States embassy in Berlin?"

"Lord, no! You don't mean it? I remember hearing he held some government job, but I'd forgotten all about him. I see now why Bright and the Federal government had a hand in this. Then, after all, it had something to do with this Prussian propaganda? Scallon was hired——"

"Not at all," said Blunt. "You're away off. I'm sure the Black Company wouldn't have hesitated to hire itself out for any kind of dirty work, providing it was profitable enough. But they aren't pikers, and had a better graft than that. Scallon always had large ideas about other people's money, and he was out to make a killing."

"In what way?" I asked, wondering what it could be.

"Well," said Blunt, "the idea was this: What do you think it would be worth if you had private information—you alone, mind—that this European war was going to end on a certain date? What would be the effect on the stock market, even if there was only a good possibility?"

Suddenly I understood. "What would it be worth? Why, I could sit into a game of freeze-out with old John D.! Jerusalem! Do you mean to say——"

"Every word of it," nodded Blunt. "Pretty big, eh? You see the Central Powers want peace if they can get it without paying too much. What their offer is, what the chances of peace are, none knows but the Wilhelmstrasse, the American ambassador in Berlin, and the man you saw with the toasted foot—Silas Q. Varney."

"By George, Blunt, I never thought of anything like this. I'm beginning to see the whole thing. I suppose President Wilson is to act as inter-

mediary? And they wouldn't trust it to the cables or in cipher with one of their own men? No, of course they wouldn't; they were afraid of a leak."

"That's the idea," said Blunt as we turned into the Avenue and headed downtown. "No, they weren't taking any chances. It was to go by word of mouth, through the American ambassador, and Varney was the one chosen to convey it here."

"How did Scallon get wind of it?"

"I don't know; of course none knew of it here outside the President himself. What I've told you I got from Bright who had it from Varney. But the tentacles of this crime octopus reach far and deep. We've only nabbed the head and part of the body, you might say. It's certain they've agents on the Continent whom we've yet to discover and run down. These agents cabled Scallon their inside information and the date of Varney's sailing —and that's what was meant by that code message, 'Varney moves on second.' Scallon passed it on to Joyce."

"Joyce brought Silas Varney here? But how?"

"You'll see as I go on. Now I don't know whether Scallon simply meant to sell this information he aimed to force from Varney, or whether he meant to operate on the market himself through a snide brokerage house that Roupell's interested

in. He had the capital and organization, and in either event, stood to make a killing."

"Then Theodore Varney never figured in the case at all?"

"Oh, he did," replied Blunt. "He was an innocent but important factor. He knew his brother was coming over on a visit here, but of course, he didn't know the true reason of that visit. Silas was to stay at the house on the Rumson Road as his guest, a natural arrangement, and one which suited Silas all around. For you remember that Shadow Lawn, the summer home of the President this year, is in the immediate neighborhood. Well, that's where Frean and Joyce came in. Theodore Varney, seeing no reason why he shouldn't, naturally mentioned to an old friend like Frean the coming visit of his brother; or if he didn't, then Miss Gelette did. Anyway, Frean found out a whole lot that was necessary."

"I'm sure he did. Even I heard from the servants some talk of the expected visit, but I never thought twice about it. I thought Silas Varney was coming on from Washington maybe, and that he probably held a post-office job. Naturally, they didn't confide all their family affairs to me. They're a close corporation."

"Yes, and you couldn't be expected to guess everything. You found out an invaluable lot as it was. But it was reckoned by the Black Company from

the start that Theodore Varney would meet his brother at the dock and bring him home in his car, and Joyce was to see that the car went somewhere else. Of course it was expected that secret-servce men would be there to keep an eye on Silas, but as his mission wasn't to be known, they couldn't guard him publicly. They wouldn't suspect anything, either, Silas being with his brother, and his car run by a chauffeur who had the best credentials. But if the secret-service men tailed them, careful plans had been laid to deal with them. Everything had been mapped out carefully beforehead, as carefully as the surprise Germany sprung on Europe. They knew, from the time Silas' boat sailed, that she couldn't pass quarantine before this evening, and therefore they'd have a better chance at night. These irregular sailings, the result of the war, suited them down to the ground.

"Well, Varney and his niece came up in the car yesterday——"

"Yes, I know." And I thought injuredly that Brenda Gelette might have explained to me more fully the nature of the business that had brought them to town. But then I remembered that she hadn't remained very long in a confiding mood.

"Luck seemed to be playing into the Company's hands," continued Blunt. "The boat was due at eight thirty, special customs arrangement having been made, and Silas Varney——"

"Wait a minute," I said. "I understand everything so far, but let us leave Silas Varney and work back to him. I want to know how you figured this thing out. It's beyond me."

"Not when you understand it," he replied. "Tim Scallon calls it fool's luck, but it was just plain hard work, Lawton. I've told you the story so far just as if all along I was dead sure of what was going to happen—but I wasn't; not by any means. I had only suspicions and theories. I'd no more idea than the man in the moon, or you yourself, what particular use Scallon meant to make of Silas Varney, though I was sure he meant to kidnap him. When I was satisfied it wasn't Theodore Varney the Company was after, then it followed logically it must be his brother. That was obvious."

"Yes, now that you say so. But it didn't seem obvious to me."

"Because you didn't think of looking Silas Varney up. When I found that he held that government job in Berlin, and had sailed on the second, the whole thing looked pretty clear. It explained that code message, why Joyce had been planted with Varney, why Frean had been snooping around—everything. Knowing Scallon of old, as I did, it didn't take any great intelligence to guess that he meant to make capital out of some information Silas Varney was bringing over."

"Yes, but how did you know that Scallon was the Black King?"

"That's where the hard work came in—routine stuff, you know," said Blunt with a shrug. "If I gave you the whole works piecemeal, all the clews we ran down, all the bloomers we opened, I'd be talking for a week. But I got my first line from this fellow, Howard Roupell, whom you'd mentioned. He had changed a lot since I last saw him, put on fat, and grown that beard, but I knew him for 'Andy' Rose, one of Scallon's old henchmen. This fellow Corby—that isn't his real name, of course—is another. That discovery sent us looking up Scallon, that and the fact that you'd asked him about Fremstad and Varney. He was supposed to be living in retirement, repenting of all his old sins. But we found his humble home was only a stall, that he had half a dozen big bank balances under various names, and that there was a swell house in another part of Philly, with a fake entrance, where he spent most of his time. It was clear he hadn't turned over any new leaf, and was getting big graft from somewhere—and, by the way, running chinks and smuggling hop was a side line of the company. That's evidently what took your friend Ashton to the Chinese quarter. He may have been decoyed, but I think he stumbled on some evidence connecting Joyce or Scallon with this organized crime trust, struck a trail which,

properly followed up, might have led to anything. And they put him away before he could use it."

"How did you know I was going to be jobbed by Frean to-night?"

"I suspected something of the sort, but didn't actually know until it happened. You see, I heard every word that passed; there's a dictaphone in your study, and it leads into the vacant apartment next door. I had it installed one night when you and Watkins were out. The manager of the Belvedere's an old friend of mine."

"Well, you're a fine, trusting bird! Did you suspect *me?*"

He laughed shamelessly. "No, but you must admit you hadn't shown much enthusiasm about obeying orders—I know all the times you tried to ditch Nast. Besides, your acting would be more convincing if you weren't wise; this dictaphone stunt is pretty old stuff, but it still makes good if the enemy doesn't suspect. It was put there to get evidence, and for your own protection, for I knew that before Silas Varney arrived the Company would make a stiff effort to put you away. They were hard up, anyway, for accurate information, to find out just how much you knew and what steps you'd taken. Frean spoke the truth when he told you they weren't sure if you'd engaged me. We managed to keep everything so quiet that we had 'em guessing."

"Then, if you were virtually in the next room, heard all that Frean said, and took it down, why did you let him work his game? Why didn't you step in and collar him?"

"Why is a crook given enough rope to hang himself?" countered Jimmie, with a grin. "That was the whole point of the game—to let them nab you and Silas Varney. We needed this red-hot evidence, and we got it——"

"So did Silas Varney, and I guess he knows just how red-hot it was."

"Yes, that was a slip-up we couldn't help—not getting to the house quite soon enough. But you can't bank on everything. I followed your taxi, but, as luck would have it, our engine stalled and held us up. Bright and Lannigan should have got there on time, only they had unexpected troubles of their own, Joyce and his pals ditching 'em a bit better than we had planned. So we all got there together. There was a risk of their killing Varney and you if we didn't get the jump on them——"

"Hold on; we've worked back to Varney but you've skipped a lot. I want to know what happened at the dock."

CHAPTER XXIV

I WIN THE QUEEN

"WELL," resumed Blunt, "I told you the boat docked at eight thirty, special customs arrangements having been made, and when Miss Gelette got back to the Waldorf—I believe she had been in the company of an ancient female friend whom she met by chance, and who carried her off and simply forced her to remain for dinner——"

"I've been called everything in my day but an ancient female," I interrupted. "As it seems there isn't much you don't know, I take it that you're fully aware that Miss Gelette dined with me at the Claremont?"

"Oh, sure," said my companion blithely. "I'm only relating the story that an ingenuous and repentant niece told to a certain sick and irate uncle. I've no use for a woman who can't tell a well-constructed lie on occasion," he added parenthetically. "When Miss Gelette got back, she found her uncle down with an attack of acute indigestion, and hopping mad at having been left alone so long. The house physician was in attendance and Mr. Varney felt so ill that he couldn't go to the dock. Therefore, Miss Gelette went alone——"

"Alone! Great Scott, Blunt! Why didn't you tell me——"

"Hold on; you needn't break my arm, old man. Don't excite yourself. She's quite all right, and safe as a church. Well, to proceed, she went alone in the car, having no suspicion of Joyce, even if he was being stalked by a jealous Italian. Yes, I know about that little affair of the blow-out. The idea was for Silas Varney to put up at the Waldorf for the night, owing to his brother's illness. Now Bright had been tipped off, but Joyce and his pals were too slick for him; they ditched him and his men, chucked Miss Gelette out in a side street, and made off with the bound and gagged Silas—same trick they worked on you. Everything worked just as they had planned, and this business of yours helped them; at least it kept me from being on hand. Well, as I say, there was a risk of their killing Varney and you if we didn't get the jump on them, and so when I got to the house it was arranged for me to first sneak in and short circuit any such plan. There was a ladder with the crowbars and axes in the patrol wagon, and so I skinned up and the rest was easy."

"Yes, when you say it like that. There's an apology due you by me, Blunt. For all your reputation, I was beginning to think you'd been overrated, and that you were asleep on the job. I take it all back. You've simply done wonders——"

"Not I," he laughed. "It wasn't any one-man job, as I warned you. Lannigan, Bright, the boys in blue of Philadelphia and Boston—all had as much to do with it as I. It was simply organization and hard work, and we'd have been nowhere but for you. It was you who started the whole business, and only for you, Scallon would have got away with his game, and the Black Company would have been more flourishing than ever. A whole lot of good certainly came from that wild jag of yours; but I'm not saying the moral of the tale is, 'Go thou and do likewise.' "

"What about Theodore Varney and his niece?" I asked. "How much do they know? And where is Miss Gelette now?"

"At her hotel. That's what helped to delay Bright and Lannigan—the old gag of throwing food to the pursuing wolves. They happened upon her after Joyce had doubled on them—I believe that's some car of Varney's, and that Joyce must have been born with a steering wheel in his fist—and they detailed a couple of men to see her home. Yes, of course she knows her uncle's been kidnaped, and I'll stop in and tell the sequel. There's no harm in her knowing the inside of it. Of course, Scallon and his crowd will have to stand their trial on the Varney charge; it's only the inside stuff about his mission here that won't be made public."

He glanced at his watch as we reached Thirty-

fourth Street. "Close on twelve. Do you think it's too late for an ancient female friend to tell the sequel to Miss Gelette instead of me?"

"You bet it is," I said. "No, it wouldn't do at all. I had no idea we were so near the Waldorf; I should have been walking the other way. I've got to beat it."

"I've got work to do, Lawton, and you haven't. Go in and tell her——"

"Far be it from me, Blunt; she wouldn't see me no matter what time it was. You see, there was —er—a sort of misunderstanding at the dinner. When you're at the explaining business, you might put in a good word for me—in fact, several words, a whole poem. I need it. If you can manage to represent me as outclassing Sherlock Holmes, Sir Galahad, and General Joffre, so much the better."

"I'll do more—I'll tell the truth about you."

"For Heaven's sake, don't! I can't afford it, Blunt. She knows me a bit too well as it is. I tell you I'm in wrong——" I stopped; a taxi had drawn in to the curb opposite where we stood, and a woman had alighted. It was Brenda Gelette.

"Good evening—I mean good morning," I said, raising my hat.

"I wish to speak with Mr. Blunt," she said, ignoring my dignified salute.

"Certainly," I said. "Blunt——" I turned, but the perfidious Blunt had vanished.

"I'm sure I saw him," said Miss Gelette.

"I'm sure, too," I agreed. "He was here—and now he isn't."

"So I see. You told him to go."

"*I?* Indeed no. Why should I?"

She blushed profusely under the electrics. "Be-because you did! It would be just like you. You knew I wanted to see him. Of course you did!"

She backed toward the taxi, I followed. "Where are you going?" I asked. "I thought you were arriving home. But now it seems you're going."

"How intelligent you are," she murmured.

I peered into the taxi; it was empty. "Do you know what time it is?" I demanded. "You're not going gallivanting about the streets at this hour alone. It is my duty to go with you."

"But it is not my pleasure, Mr. Lawton."

"I can't help that, Miss Gelette. Either I march you back to the Waldorf, or I accompany you on this errand. Take your choice."

"Oh, very well," she shrugged. "Of course, if you're going to be perfectly brutal again, I am quite defenseless, and I must go to Roosevelt Hospital. I've not time to argue——"

We entered the taxi and sat in formidable silence.

"Well?" said Miss Gelette at length, her foot tapping. "Why don't you demand why I'm going to the hospital at this hour? I suppose you are going to force me to tell you, but I won't."

"Really, I'm not at all inquisitive."

"Then you've changed greatly. But, of course, the real fact is that you know already. Mr. Blunt told you; I'm positive he did."

"Well, that's true," I admitted. "I was taking a walk and happened to meet him, and he told me about your Uncle Silas. I suppose they phoned you from Roosevelt? Fancy all that has happened in a few hours; it doesn't seem possible. You must have had a very exciting time, from all accounts."

"I had," she said uncompromisingly. "What did Mr. Blunt tell you?"

"Oh, that Joyce is a rascal—which is no more than I suspected——"

"If you suspected that, then why didn't you tell us?"

"Well, I wasn't sure——"

"No, of course you weren't. You never suspected him at all. We might all have had our throats cut and you'd never have known, or cared."

"Oh, but I would; I don't like my throat being cut—well, no matter if you didn't mean me, too. Anyway, he's a rascal, it seems, and with other rascals kidnaped your Uncle Silas and held him to ransom. They took him to some lonely house and he wouldn't pay up. He was wounded but managed to escape, and he's now at Roosevelt. It's all very interesting, like something you'd read about."

"I didn't know you were acquainted with Mr. Blunt."

"Oh, in a sort of way. He tells me things."

She smiled with great superiority. "So I see. But a great deal happened to-night that you'll never know."

"You might tell me."

"I might, but I won't. If ever I needed a friend —a *real* friend who could do things and not merely talk and act silly—it was to-night. I had an awful time."

"I'm very sorry to hear it. If you had only phoned me——"

"Phoned *you!*"

"Well, I didn't even know you had an Uncle Silas; at least I'd forgotten, and I didn't know he was coming——"

"No, of course, you didn't. You never know anything. But if you had been there, what would you have done? Nothing. It was an occasion for men, real men. If it hadn't been for Mr. Blunt and Mr. Bright——"

"Blunt never told me what he did."

"No he doesn't talk about himself, which must seem strange to you. But Mr. Bright, who saved me from those wretches, told me all that Mr. Blunt was doing."

"Well," I said as the taxi rattled under the L at Fifty-eighth Street, "everybody can't be a hero,

and you know I never pretended to be one. One can't be everything. I hope that you really weren't in any danger."

"I was. I might have been killed; but I'm not going to tell you anything about it. Here's the hospital. I suppose you'll insist upon coming in?"

"No, I never liked the smell. I'll sit here and keep the car warm. Don't be long."

"I'll be as long as I like. I don't want you to wait. I prefer to return alone. I insist upon it."

"Very well. I shall be here."

"Oh, you—you——" Words failing her for once, she turned and entered the hospital.

She kept me waiting a really scandalous time, simply out of spite. It is remarkable how spiteful even the best women can be, and for absolutely no reason at all. When at length she returned, she entered the taxi without a word, seemingly too concerned about something even to notice my continued presence.

"I hope your uncle is coming along all right," I ventured at length.

No answer.

"I hope your uncle——"

"Don't speak to me!"

"Very well; as you wish. As I was saying, I hope——"

Then she burst in on me in a muffled voice. "Of all the mean, detestable, contemptible characters I

ever met—yes, I mean *you!* I—I hate you! That's right, sit there and laugh at me. You *are* laughing! Oh, but you are *wicked!*"

"What have I done now, or failed to do?"

"Y-you know perfectly well! You knew all the time. You were there at that house. It was you who really saved my uncle. And—and you pretended. You let me talk. Oh, but you are *wicked!*"

"I didn't say anything that wasn't literally true either——"

"You did! You let me think—no, it's no use trying to explain. I've learned everything—everything! Mr. Blunt told me the whole story over the wire. He guessed that I was going to the hospital. I know *everything.*"

"But you don't want to believe a word that man says," I assured her earnestly. "I've got to be honest about it. I asked him to put in a good word for me when he saw you, to tell you a lot of glorified nonsense." To my consternation I saw that she was crying. "My dear little girl——"

"I—I'm not your dear little girl! You hate me. Y-you never tell me the truth about anything. You're always making f-fun of me. You m-might have been killed. They tortured you and—and you only laugh. We—we owe you everything, and—and—oh, Peter——"

She finished it on my knee, arms about my unworthy neck and her snub nose buried under my

collar. I don't know how it happened, nor do I care; some things are far too wonderful to be susceptible of analysis or explanation. It just happened; one moment she was calling me some of the names I deserved, the next she was perched there, pouring out the most beautiful untruths imaginable. I'm ashamed to tell you all the nice things she said about me; I was ashamed even to listen, and by and by I told her so.

"The only two heroes who figure in this thing," I confessed, seeing that she'd find it out, anyway, all in good time, "are Mr. Blunt and that stoic uncle of yours, to whom I take off my hat." Of course, this was merely a figure of speech, my arms being fully engaged with another figure. "I hate to think what I would have done in Silas Varney's place—or, rather, I know only too well. I wouldn't have dedicated a perfectly good foot——"

"Yes, you would, and more! Oh, P-Peter, I can't say half what I feel! But, Peter dear, do—do you really love me?"

"Why, bless your heart, don't you know I do, and did from the first moment I saw you? Haven't I been telling you all along——"

"No, you haven't. But—but, Peter dear, please begin now."

Well, do you know, I'm inclined to agree with Tim Scallon that some fools have all the luck. Certainly it was so in my case.

The abortive German peace offer has become a matter of history, and, since the affair of the Black Company, even the Great War itself is over and done with, if not forgotten. It is a matter of history also how, in spite of Silas Varney's heroism and all he suffered, his mission was betrayed. The Wall Street side of it is likewise a matter of history, financial if not otherwise. There were those who made fortunes, but Tim Scallon and his crowd were not among them. No, nor I myself, nor any honest man I know.

The erstwhile Black King, with several of his court, including Roupell or Rose, Corby, and Joyce, are the guests of the State at its famous rest home on the banks of the Hudson, where they promise to remain for a considerable period. For in no case was there found evidence capable of convicting them of first-degree murder, and I dare say Scallon, while making brushes, is comforting himself with the hope that some day he will be free to pick that long-deferred bone with Lisping Jimmie.

I hear there is some talk about Silas Varney being our next representative at the Court of St. James. He walks now with a slight but permanent limp that rather adds to his distinguished appearance.

Theodore Varney is still alive and kicking. Indeed, his hold on life seems to have increased, if anything, and he is looked on as a sort of medical

marvel, perversely defying all the accepted notions as to the duration of his singular disease.

And so we still keep up the "tragic farce," but all his bitterness and venom have gone. Perhaps this is due to his absorbing interest in the antics of a small namesake. Oh, yes, I've forgotten about that sinister Demon; it had no chance in the Argonne and was perhaps finally slain by the bullet that invalided me out. Anyway, its final passing heralded the coming of this delightful one. At least, the harried neighbors call him a demon, and Brenda says he gets all his inquisitiveness, impudence, and lack of reverence for the truth, from me. Also, by the way, all his good looks. Of course, that goes without saying.

THE END.

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